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ADVANCE ON ARKON : VOLUME 3 (OF 6)
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Alexander Huiskes
Christian Montillon

Perry Rhodan NEO: Volume 15 [Complete]

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Episode 29: Belinkhar's Decision

By Alexander Huiskes

1.

On Board the Tosoma

“Space,” General Pounder had said at the very beginning of Perry Rhodan’s training, “is cold and black.”

Pounder had never been in the Beta-Albireo binary system; otherwise, he never would have claimed anything like that. A large orange star and a small blue one juggled four planets: a magma-red sphere, far too heavy in relation to its small size, close to the flame core of the system; a seemingly untouched, white world with a delicate blue atmosphere, a brown-black charred planet without air; and finally a small gray boulder far out, as if fleeing from the strange forces. In stationary orbit around the white world, a strange web shone in many colors. The Web,a stage station for spaceships, which was operated by the Nham, a clan of the humanoid Mehandor, who were commonly referred to as “Galactic Traders.”

No, space was just the unobtrusive backdrop for color games that the Earth had never produced. But that was the end of all the playfulness, because this sentence had also come from General Pounder: “Space is mercilessly deadly if you make a mistake.”

This statement was now about to come true. Several large spherical spaceships had grouped around the Web—and one was flying straight towards it.

A sudden jolt went through the *Tosoma*, knocking Bull off his feet and throwing him against a console.

“What about all the mousebeavers in the galaxy?” He grimaced only briefly in pain. “The new year is just picking up speed, isn’t it?”

Rhodan gave him a suspicious look. What was Bull hiding? The fact that he was hiding something was literally written on his face. But this was probably not the right time or place to ask him about

it.

The Web had just pushed Rhodan's expedition spaceship away from it, thus following the order to hand over the traitors to the Empire.

The Arkonide Empire was a galactic empire which Rhodan's companions Thora and Crest had wanted to return home to and which Earth hoped to form a valuable alliance with. No, the new year was only three days old and hadn't started well at all, but it certainly didn't leave much room for boredom.

"The matriarch Belinkhar of *Ke-Matlon* is throwing us to that Naat and his presumptuous Imperial battle squadron," said Thora, sitting in an armchair in the command center and keeping an eye on the holos. "Cowards, the Mehandor."

Rhodan didn't respond, although he certainly didn't share her view. He was sure that Belinkhar had no choice. Eleven armed Arkonide spaceships were a good argument for bowing to the orders of the Naat, even if in purely formal terms a military commander could certainly not give orders to a civilian space station declared neutral during peacetime.

But as far as her own situation was concerned, Thora did not seem amenable to logical reasoning. He would probably never forget her half-horrified, half-hateful face when, aboard the Arkonide ship *Keat'Ark*, it turned out that the commander with the rank of Reekha was not a real Arkonide, but a chunky, coarse-looking Naat.

He had never heard of the Naats before, although they were by no means exotic in the Empire, as a search of the *Tosoma's* database had shown. Unfortunately, Rhodan still didn't know much about the species, so he had to rely on his intuition, which told him that Novaal was not one to make empty threats. He would not spend much time flaunting his instruments, per se, as the Inquisition had once done on Earth.

The matriarch of the Web had no reason to be particularly well-disposed towards the *Tosoma*—after all, Rhodan had tried to

deprive her of her wages. As payment for the repair of their ship, she had demanded one-seventh of the crew as a workforce for seven years.

Rhodan had believed he had no choice but to agree and then later go back on his word. But it was of no use; on the contrary, their situation had deteriorated, not least due to the appearance of Novaal's squadron.

The holoprojections on the ceiling of the bridge showed the full extent of their distress: tall and purple, Rhodan saw the damaged *Tosoma*, their spaceship, the pride and joy of Terran astronauts. Every weakness was mercilessly highlighted and quantified with yellow lettering.

In a neighboring projection, their strategic location was depicted in three dimensions. Colored lines showed current and conceivable movement vectors, text overlays revealed details about the individual objects depicted, such as the performance of the enemy force fields, the thickness and nature of the armor, or up-to-date information on energy flow and distribution.

You didn't have to be a military genius like Caesar or Napoleon to analyze the situation: the *Tosoma* had laid at the bottom of the ocean for ten thousand years. Although it was many centuries ahead of human technology, it was no longer state-of-the-art for its builders.

"A classic car with engine failure compared to eleven modern racing cars," Bull said, summing up the situation.

Rhodan gasped. The beefy man with the close-cut red hair did not look good: deep circles ran under his water-blue eyes, his beard was stubbled, and his cheekbones seemed more pronounced.

Bull put one hand on his hip. "Does anyone seriously want to bet on the oldie? Damn, we can't even break their oil pans!"

"What else are we supposed to do? Give up?" asked Rhodan. He was reluctant to throw in the towel just like that. There had to be a way to turn the tide and make amends for his mistake. After all,

they weren't the villains and swindlers they were thought to be in this area of space.

"Never!" Thora jumped up and threw back her head imperiously, suddenly falling back into the behavior she had long discarded. But humans and Arkonides probably didn't change that quickly. "Novaal called us—Crest and me, but probably you too, because you're traveling with us—traitors. Don't you know what that means, you barbarian?"

Gucky placed a reassuring hand on her leg, and she put up with the touch from him without grumbling. Apart from Crest, who was still on the Web, Gucky enjoyed an absolutely exceptional position in her regard.

"Words are patient. You also call Perry a barbarian, and yet he doesn't grow hair everywhere, and stammers 'br-br.' That's where the word comes from, did you know that?"

"This is not the time for jokes. When an official representative of the Empire, even if he is a leather-skinned, noseless Naat, calls someone a traitor, it's akin to a formal verdict. In the periphery of the Empire, there is no procrastination or revision in the execution of such a sentence. If we surrender, it will be our death."

"With this balance of power, it will probably be our death if we resist," Rhodan said.

She looked at him as if the term barbarian was still too flattering. "There's another option: escape."

"And of course you'll tell us how we're going to do it with this old barge!" Bull quipped breathlessly.

"Of course, because you won't come up with it on your own. You, Rhodan, will hold out against Novaal while I prepare the *Tosoma* for escape. A single transition jump is probably enough for the squadron to lose us. Then we'll be safe for the time being."

"Probably?" asked Bull suspiciously. "For the time being? Doesn't sound like a plan, but an act of desperation."

“That depends on how much time I have left for my work.” She ran one hand through her hair and let it slip through her fingers. The pale white-blonde Arkonide looked stunning, he had to give her that. And she didn’t even seem to be aware of her charisma.

“What about our comrades who are still on the Web?” said Rhodan.

“There’s nothing we can do for them,” she replied brusquely. Everyone could hear that she didn’t really want to say that, and everyone was aware of what it meant to her.

Nevertheless, Rhodan followed up. “You realize that Crest is still there too?”

“Yes.” Saying that one word seemed to take her a lot of effort, but she said it nonetheless. “Yes. Yes, I know!”

Rhodan nodded curtly. He did not want to add fuel to the fire, but simply make Thora aware of the implications of her plan. Crest was such an important part of her life that it had to be infinitely difficult for her to leave him behind, especially in close proximity to an Arkonide battle squadron that was obviously not friendly at all.

“You’ve convinced me. Let’s give it a try!”

“Novaal speaks!” A holoprojection of the Naat commander appeared in front of Rhodan. “You’re capitulating?”

Rhodan was silent for a moment as he looked at the Naat appraisingly. The black-skinned stranger was…big. With a height of three meters and a width of one and a half to two meters, he could not think of another word: the wall-like body rested on two short pillaresque legs and carried two long arms and a large, hairless ball head with three large eyes and a large, thin-lipped, oval mouth.

A plan began to take shape in his mind, relying on Thora not to set an overly atypical example for the Arkonide people.

“I don’t think a Naat can take it upon himself to speak like that to the crew of an Arkonide spacecraft. The Empire would never sink

so low."

"Not a Naat, perhaps, but certainly a Reekha," Novaal replied without hesitation or visible emotion. "Have the *Tosoma* ready to let in our boarding squads. Any resistance will result in the destruction of the ship."

"You're breaking Imperial law!" Rhodan reproached him.

"So?" The Naat seemed interested and slightly amused. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm talking about the right to property. In our culture, this right expires in the event that an owner no longer takes care of his property or dies without proven heirs. This right is enshrined in the Empire, isn't it?"

It was a shot in the dark, but it seemed to have hit its mark, as Novaal hesitated for a moment. Finally, when he spoke again, he took refuge in a counter-question.

"What role should this play in our situation?"

"We found this ship at the bottom of an ocean. It lay there for ten thousand years without anyone caring about it. We salvaged it and repaired it, so it rightfully belongs to us."

Out of the corner of his eye, Rhodan saw Thora and Bull working together on the holographic controls. They communicated with glances and quick gestures. The two probably wouldn't admit it, but when it came down to it, they worked well as a team. Even if one sometimes pulled the control surface away from the other. But there was something wrong with Bull; he seemed more dogged than usual.

"The ship belongs to the Empire, and the Empire is not dying, so your argument is invalid. Besides, traitors like you have no rights."

Rhodan laughed mockingly. "You're distracting from the point, Novaal. You know full well that these excuses would not stand up to scrutiny by the Emperor's legal advisors. Only those who have once belonged to it can become traitors to the Great Empire. But

that doesn't apply to me or my crew. Ergo, we can't be traitors at all."

"So?" Novaal suddenly seemed alert. His enormous size and the darkness emanating from him caused a feeling of threat to rise in Rhodan. This stranger was not a human being, not in appearance, not in thought, not in action. At best, he had been Arkonized. "So you mean to say that you are not Arkonides?"

"We are humans."

"Humans..." Novaal rolled the word on his tongue. He seemed to be thinking. "Never heard of it. But even a Zaliter would certainly claim to be a Zaliter, yet he is also a member of the Arkonide Empire because he is descended from Arkonide colonists. Why should it be any different for you? You're clearly Arkonide."

"Our world does not belong to the Empire, nor are we descendants of Arkonide colonists," Rhodan replied, deliberately leaving the Naat a gap in the argument. After all, it wasn't about really convincing him, even if that would have been a wonderful stroke of luck, but about distracting him until the *Tosoma* was ready to escape.

"Tell me, how could an Arkonide ship be found on your planet if it didn't belong to the Empire?" Novaal attacked the open flank of Rhodan's argument, as expected.

"You tell me: why have you never heard of humans if they really belonged to the Empire? Look at your database." Rhodan tried to buy more time.

Then Bull gave him a sign: two thumbs up! Thora smiled contentedly and confirmed the programmed commands. The ready signal lit up. Her plan would work...

"I'm going to..." Novaal interrupted himself and stood as if frozen, the three big eyes looking at something that Rhodan could not recognize, probably messages from his tracking department. Then there was a noticeable change within the Naat. "Shut down your power generators immediately!" he ordered harshly.

But it was already too late—the *Tosoma* sped off with roaring impulse engines.

Thora let out a suppressed cry of jubilation, but Rhodan wasn't sure if it was justified. The Naat had reacted very quickly and at the same time very deliberately.

"Commander!" roared Novaal, but Rhodan broke the connection.

"And now?" he asked, seeking Thora's gaze. He felt the sweat on his forehead. *It must go well,* he thought. *It must!*

"Now we just have to get it to fifty percent the speed of light," Thora said with a dangerous sparkle in her eyes. "Come on, get to the controls! We're nowhere near in the clear! The element of surprise will end sooner than we would like."

The *Tosoma* evaded the grip of the eleven spherical spacecraft by taking a course that carried it at a shallow angle over the space station, close to the atmosphere of the icy planet over which it was located.

Thora had apparently calculated that the Naat would not dare to vandalize the station, as it was too valuable in its function as a landmark, shipyard, and marketplace. So he either had to follow them quickly or wait until the risk of a chance hit to the Web was low enough. In both cases, the *Tosoma* would have gained a bit of time.

But would it be enough? Rhodan looked doubtfully at the tracking images and, as a pilot, prepared to lend that part of unpredictability that would elevate the flight maneuvers from flawless to perfect. Because only then could they escape from their opponent.

"Enemy fire," said Gucky, who was looking closely at the holoimages on the ceiling. "It's going to be a hot ride, friends!"

Faster than expected, the gun control stations of the combat squadron reacted: ultra-hot embers and torpedoes chased through

space after the *Tosoma*. With inhuman precision, they shot past the station without hitting it.

The *Tosoma* roared and the whole bridge shook. *What did Thora plan?* Rhodan thought. The Arkonide had put all her eggs in one basket, that was clear to him, but it was only at that moment that he realized how much so.

Never before had the acoustic inner workings of the old spaceship seemed so infernal to him. He also knew that they had to use all their reserves and turn off all the control mechanisms that were intended for normal operation. If they didn't throw everything into the balance, they would lose.

And even if all possibilities were exploited, their chances of escaping were not particularly good. Bull had made this point with his classic car comparison. The high-revving cars of the Empire were far superior to the good old *Tosoma*.

"They'll take up pursuit," Bull said. "It's too early, damn it! Two idiotic seconds too early!"

Thora did not turn away her gaze, which she held firmly fixed on the acceleration and speed indicators. "We can do it. Rhodan, don't make evasive moves; otherwise we won't reach the fifty percent fast enough."

Rhodan saw the eleven ships move closer. They were undamaged craft of a much younger series than the *Tosoma*. It was going to be close—extremely close.

"Shielding field load sixty percent," Gucky reported excitedly. "No, wait, seventy and rising. These guys are really angry."

"How much longer?" asked Rhodan.

"Ten seconds, if this continues."

"Three," said Thora. The speed of the ship was already at forty-eight percent of the speed of light and rapidly increasing. "Two, one..."

Now! Rhodan thought, bracing himself for the pain that came with each transition.

Instead, a terrible blow struck the *Tosoma*, and all the lights went out.

2.

On Mars

See: this is Mars...

The fourth planet of the solar system, the closest to Earth and basically habitable thanks to its existing, albeit thin, atmosphere. It has only a tenth of the Earth's mass, a quarter of the Earth's surface, and half the diameter of the Earth, but it is one and a half times as far away from the warming fire of the Sun and orbited by twice as many satellites.

And yet Mars has fascinated people since time immemorial. Its dominant colors, red and orange, like blood and embers, gave science the idea of naming it after the Roman god of war and christening its two moons Fear and Terror: Phobos and Deimos. In fact, fire and humidity are not characteristics that would distinguish it. Mars is a cold planet when measured against Earth. Near the equator, it is twenty degrees during the day, but up to minus eighty-five degrees at night; on average minus fifty-five, although it can be significantly warmer in the south than in the north.

And anyone who has ever seen its arid plains and barren mountains, felt the taste of dust on their tongue, with every breath tasted of filtered, enriched, processed air, which nevertheless can't expelled because it is so ubiquitous, suspects what Mars lacks: water.

In fact, there is water. The polar ice caps store it, and in summer they partially release it back into the atmosphere as vapor. But that is not enough to turn the red dust desert into a fertile world.

To achieve this is the privilege that humanity has acquired, thanks in part to the Arkonide technology that it has been so surprisingly entrusted with.

See: this was Mars...

The tall, gaunt man sat tied up in the Mars mobile, which drove

through the underground of Arsia Mons towards an unknown destination.

I, Cyr Aescunnar, historian, scientist, and researcher, sit tied up under observation by a strange creature, driven by a non-human in a vehicle that is taking me under a volcano on the planet Mars.

If someone had told him his future two years ago, he would have thought it was a lie. Four impossibilities in a single sentence!

On Mars!

Under a volcano!

Chauffeured by a deaf-mute inhabitant of the Vega system!

Threatened by a strange Martian creature!

Despite his precarious situation, Aescunnar couldn't help but smile. The fifth lie was so obvious and underpinned everything that no one noticed it anymore: his own name. Because he had not been born as Cyr Aescunnar; he had awakened at some point and known that this was his name, in that deep way that only sometimes exists when name and being are one.

And yet all five lies were true, even if those truths seemed unbelievable to him.

The Mars mobile bumped along through the darkness only briefly revealed by the headlights: coarse, porous stone pierced by tunnels. Where were they taking him?

Thanks to the transparent dome, he felt as if the darkness were falling upon him, reaching for him with its inky fingers. Only the pale, indirect illumination provided by the dashboard made it possible to perceive anything at all.

And his legs hurt. The Bubbles, as the Mars mobiles were sometimes called, brought together the best of Terran and Ferron technology, but since Ferrons were stockier and shorter than humans, he wobbled back and forth on the seat while still feeling cramped and uncomfortable in the leg area on the other. In

addition, he felt the weight of his spacesuit, despite all the relief that this modern garment offered him. Fifty kilograms was fifty kilograms, no matter what the scientists might tell him about the difference between mass and weight. But not just the pure weight, or just the mass, depressed him like his outlook for the near future.

What did Hetcher and the sinister creature who called itself "Tweel" plan to do with him? What did they want? Surely, it didn't have to do with him; he hadn't done anything to them, at least nothing he remembered. So their actions had to be rooted in their own motives. First, they had wanted to kill him; now, apparently they didn't. They didn't even say a word about it—no gesture signifying anything like regret or insight. Did they even know what they were doing? What destination were they heading for?

He sat there in the faint bluish light and listened to his breathing. How loud and heavy it sounded under his helmet; he hadn't noticed it before. In general, everything sounded somehow distorted and dull. How he longed to feel fresh air on his face again, the feeling of space around him... In a word: freedom.

"Are we going to be there soon?" he asked, breaking the silence that felt so uncomfortable because it only increased his uncertainty.

He heard a deep hiss, as if from a great serpent. The sound rose and fell softly. An elastic beak clacked next to his head, fortunately outside his protective suit. A four-toed claw dug into his shoulder, squeezing the thick, yielding fabric. A sound vaguely reminiscent of the rustling of leaves sounded. Was the noise coming from that thing...Tweel?

In the play of light and shadow, his gaze slid along its fingers and scrawny arms, up and into the face of the...creature. It looked around on all sides with jerking, bobbing, birdlike movements of its head. It didn't say anything. Did it even speak? It stared at him motionlessly, then its gaze wandered to a point where Aescunnar knew Hetcher to be.

He turned around again. Hetcher looked at him, his fingers in eager motion: *Don't be afraid,* they announced. *We don't want to harm you.*

The historian was by no means reassured. *We?* What was the relationship between the mute Ferron and the…well, Martian being…that he had chosen to use the sign for "us"?

"What do you want? Hetcher, my friend, tell me, please."

Of course, Hetcher could not speak, for he was deaf and mute. Aescunnar was able to communicate with the Ferron in a targeted manner by means of a program he had developed himself. In doing so, he had discovered that Hetcher was more than just a worker who only made himself useful by checking individual installations on Mars. It had never occurred to anyone to take Hetcher's observations seriously, or even to request them in the first place. What a waste…

That's difficult to explain but easy to understand, Hetcher replied. *You have to experience it. I'm not allowed to tell you. I can't do it. I don't want to.*

Aescunnar slid nervously back and forth. Such statements did not reassure him at all. Tweel bent its neck so that the head with the colorful feathers oscillated directly in front of his face. Was he mistaken or was the Martian being laughing at him? At least that's how the expression looked.

Unfortunately, it obscured his view of Hetcher. He chased the creature out of his field of vision with his hands and accepted its annoying hissing. Was it really intelligent?

"Who or what is Tweel? At least you can tell me that. Surely you'll allow me to know my would-be murderer."

Hetcher made a gesture of helplessness, then signed, *Just have a little more patience. Our journey will soon be over. I have to continue driving now; the path is not easy.*

Aescunnar tried several more times to get Hetcher to tell him something about what was actually happening on Mars, but the Ferron simply turned back to the dashboard. His hands were now silent and concentrated on steering the vehicle through the rock.

Tweel huddled next to the human. It eyed him suspiciously and with amusement at the same time, but it did nothing.

As if it is waiting for something...

Aescunnar became nervous.

They penetrated deeper and deeper into the subsoil of Mars; sand turned to stone, and temperatures increased slightly. The vehicle crawled through the eternal darkness at less than twenty kilometers per hour. Sometimes interesting rock formations passed by so quickly that he couldn't take a closer look at them, but something about them seemed artificial. Not conspicuous, but in such a way that it did not go unnoticed by his keen eye. Would he find the spots again by copying the vehicle's memory drives?

If I get around to it at all...

At some point, Aescunnar had completely lost track of time and Hetcher slowed down. Then the vehicle stopped completely: the rocking stopped, and the light from the headlights remained focused on one spot.

They shone upon another Mars mobile in the cavern. Its dome was open, neither corpse nor creature within. Where was the crew and what were they looking for in this place? With so few people on the Red Planet, any passages into a volcano were unlikely to be of primary interest, especially since the Mars mission was first intended to explore the extent to which the planet was suitable for shaping human living conditions.

Aescunnar summed up his astonishment in one question: "A vehicle! How did it get here?"

Probably via the same path as us, Hetcher replied dryly. *We'll take a look at it; it won't take long. In the meantime, do you want to stretch your feet?*

Aescunnar just nodded, so surprised he was by this offer. While he had been unable to escape from the moving vehicle, they had

kept him handcuffed, and now, with every chance to escape, they let him go? It didn't add up. Something wasn't right, he sensed. What was happening here?

To answer that, he had to follow a path of many other questions that seemed to lead in completely different directions. First of all, there was Hetcher: What secret was hidden behind this figure, which at first glance seemed unassuming? The Ferron had certainly been to several Vega worlds and knew the conditions of successful terraforming. So what was he doing here when he only handled seemingly unimportant things like maintenance? And after his surprising behavior over the last hour, more fundamental questions arose: What did he know about Mars that no one else even suspected? Was he really so clueless about the fate of the other Mars mobile and its crew? And...what was his relationship with Tweel?

Tweel, on the other hand, inspired a very special set of questions. Such a thing could not live on Mars. To be honest, it seemed impossible to him that a further developed form of life existed in this place at all. If that were the case, he would have to consider Tweel to be a spawn of his mind, an illusion. However, he was unable to do that after his experiences with the creature. Unless he was truly losing his mind. So all that remained was the assumption that Tweel really existed. In that case, it was hard to imagine it could be a lone being. Consequently, there could be more creatures like Tweel. Maybe a pack had attacked the Mars mobile?

His thoughts were abruptly interrupted when Hetcher loosened his shackles.

Come, he said.

Tweel squatted beside them, but in a strangely friendly way. Aescunnar stood up, felt the pain in his legs, and carefully climbed out of the Mars mobile. The movements were difficult for him as the extra mass made itself felt. The gaunt man first had to figure out how best to move.

Stretch your legs. This cave is big enough, Hetcher said. *You'll find us at the Mars mobile over there.*

“Did you... Do you mind if I look at the other Mars mobile?”

Hetcher and Tweel exchanged only a quick glance. *No, why should we?* Hetcher replied. *But it is better not to disturb us at work; then it will go faster.*

Aescunnar didn’t intend to get in Tweel’s way with anything. “Sure.”

Snarling, hissing, and rustling, Tweel glided towards and up the Mars mobile until it sat on its dome. Its four-toed fingers and claws clung to it, enthroning the creature perched above the Martian vehicle. Its eyes eagerly sifted through every detail, its feathers bristled, and it rocked its head back and forth.

Hetcher hurried to follow. Aescunnar waited a moment, then he went after him and went to look up the serial number on the vehicle. And indeed, there it was!

Well, something like that. The serial number was that of the Mars mobile that Bradbury Base’s commander had been in before contact was lost.

Commander Nguyen had disappeared without a trace four weeks earlier. It was clear to everyone at Bradbury Base that he must be dead. He simply did not have enough air to survive that long outside of the base.

Now it was certain: the commander was certainly dead. But Nguyen had not fallen victim to a technical defect or a Martian dust storm. He had steered his vehicle into the underworld of the Red Planet and gotten out here. Was it voluntary? Had he been lured to this place? Or had Tweel forced him? What had Commander Nguyen been doing under Arsia Mons? And, more importantly, where had he gone?

“Strange,” he said, more to himself than the aliens.

What’s strange? Hetcher asked.

Aescunnar shrugged. “This. That Nguyen left his Mars mobile behind. He must have found something really important, even if he

forgot to inform Bradbury Base about it."

Hetcher exchanged a glance with Tweel. *Yes, you could put it that way. He discovered something...*

Alarmed, Aescunnar took a few steps forward, circling the vehicle, and saw a slumped figure in the yellowish light of his helmet headlamp, his back to the wall, legs resting against the Mars mobile. A human in a spacesuit.At a glance, he could see that the suit was intact, with no signs of a fight.

"Commander Nguyen!" Aescunnar almost yelled the words and was quickly by the other man's side. He grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him.

The figure's head jerked up, and Aescunnar flinched at the sight: he had found Commander Nguyen!

But the man was dead. And that wasn't the truly horrible thing, because after all, anyone who roamed alone on an alien planet lived with that risk. No, what shocked the historian was the expression on the man's face. It was what someone who had caught a glimpse of hell and realized that it far exceeded all his worst fantasies looked like. The look of those wide-open, dead eyes...

A scraping, smacking sound like suction claws on glass sounded behind him. Tweel looked at him, no longer curious.

Knowing.

No! Aescunnar thought, and he had a fleeting vision of his own future. His very short future. Then he ran. He didn't know what to expect, but one thing was clear to him: he had to go.

3.

On Board the Tosoma

+ + + *Tosoma* Files: Passengers + + +

+ + + TO-P 756: Kergonen, Felicita + + +

Born: June 29, 2016, height 1.65 meters, 49 kilograms, hair color blonde, eyes green-gray

Professional career: Studied at Yale, specializing in transplant medicine, thesis topic (in progress): Terran-Ferron peculiarities

Prognosis: Passenger F.K. stands out among her peers due to her sober powers of observation and natural curiosity, but by no means significantly. Her participation in the voyage resulted primarily from her friendship with Tifflor/Julian (see TO-B-312) as well as Eberhardt/Klaus (see TO-P-757), and Hifield/Humpry (see TO-P-758).

+ + + TO-P 757: Eberhardt, Klaus + + +

Born: August 15, 2015, height 1.72 meters, 83 kilograms, hair color dark blonde, eyes gray-blue

Professional career: Studied at Yale, began early, specialization in physics/astrophysics, graduation in physics 2036, doctorate in astrophysics in progress

Prognosis: K.E. is considered an outstanding theorist even among Yale's top executives. His understanding of the hyperphysical peculiarities of Arkonide technology is striking.

Received an offer for a scholarship at the Terran University for Theoretical Basic Research. Participation in the trip is particularly recommended due to the friendship with Tifflor/Julian (see TO-B-312), as well as Kergonen/Felicita (see TO-P-756), and Hifield/

Humpry (see TO-P-758).

+ + + TO-P 758: Hifield, Humpry + + +

Born: July 9, 2015, height 1.91 meters, 110 kilograms, hair color blonde, eyes blue

Professional career: Studied at Yale, majored in sports science, coach of the Yale youth boxing team, active heavyweight boxer (0 losses in 18 fights 2035/36)

Prognosis: H.H. is in the best physical condition and will give a sports presentation together with TO-P-600 (see Bantamin, Shalam) and TO-P-342 (Kirkesgaard, Ole) at the Arkon Court. Psychological care is recommended (indication: inferiority complexes with overcompensation); therefore, also recommendation to take in close friends, esp. Tifflor/Julian (see TO-B-312) and Orsons/Mildred (see TO-P-087), Kergonen/Felicita (see TO-P-756), Eberhardt/Klaus (see TO-P-757).

"What was that?"

Gucky's voice rang out in the darkness. All light had failed. Not even a star illuminated the bridge; that was the price for safety at the center of the spherical ship.

Rhodan stood in absolute darkness and listened. He suddenly heard much more clearly, as if his brain were now concentrating on the acoustic stimuli since there was nothing more to perceive visually.

Again, the *Tosoma* trembled under attack. He had to make an effort not to lose his balance, although normally the movement would not have caused him any trouble. This, too, was an effect of the darkness and sudden uncertainty. At the same time, there was a rumble that did not match the usual background noise.

We've been hit!

His stomach felt like it was stuck in a rapid downward elevator

that stopped all of a sudden. He could hear Bull's heavy breathing. Thora even choked slightly, and Gucky sounded as if he wanted to expel a pellet.

What do the others hear coming from me?

He cursed the highly designed, service-oriented equipment of the spaceship. A couple of neat emergency switches, purely mechanical, plus emergency lights powered by their own small batteries...little things that would have been enough to make the *Tosoma* manageable in the unlikely event that all redundancy systems failed. Something that, according to the understanding of the Arkonides, was not possible at all. Except it was happening at that very moment.

"What do we do now?" asked Gucky in a trembling voice.

"Wait and see," Thora replied.

Something shimmered in the blackness before Rhodan's eyes, which involuntarily reminded him of the fairy dust from *Peter Pan*. The shimmering became a diffuse glow and formed displays, created by advanced Arkonide holotechnology. On the other side, material control surfaces, parts of the graphical user interface, flashed like puzzle pieces and gradually formed themselves back into meaningful displays. The lighting came on and flickered painfully, frantically before rising back to normal levels and burning more steadily. So, the systems had stabilized again. But not all of them.

"Damage in the engine area," Thora reported. "Speed at forty-seven percent."

"If I haven't cursed today," grumbled Bull, who was sitting on the floor holding his hip, "the moment has come, hasn't it?"

Rhodan pulled himself together. He felt something warm, damp running down his face. A cut. He wiped away the blood and went to Thora. "Anyone hurt?" he asked.

"We're fine." That was Gucky.

“Don’t ask so stupidly.” Bull. “We should close our spacesuits.”

Thora stared at the instruments and opened her mouth as if to answer him, then the *Tosoma* trembled again. Indicators lit up in aggressive red, somewhere the noise of a terrible explosion sounded out, and immediately alarms boomed throughout the ship.

Rhodan saw the status report at the same moment as Thora. A volley of radiation had penetrated the armor of the hull and damaged one of the structural converters that had just been provisionally repaired by the Mehandor.

If we weren’t sitting in the center of the space, we would already be mourning the first fatalities, he thought. He shouted loudly, “It’s over! We must surrender!”

Thora narrowed her eyes. “It’s too late for that. Hold on!”

Bull, who was pulling himself back up, saw what she was doing and said in bewilderment, “You’re not serious, Thora!”

Thora enabled full counterthrust and forced the *Tosoma* into a desperate maneuver. The ship was now racing towards its pursuers and firing from all weapons at the Imperial ships.

“When we reach the station,” Thora said.

She’s riding the Pooka, Rhodan thought. *That can’t go well …*

He prepared himself for what would inevitably come in old Irish legends: jumping off a cliff.

The ground shook beneath their feet, but Francesca insisted, “This ship is a technological marvel. Arkonide high technology, with multiple backup systems. Nothing can happen to us.”

Sven grabbed her shoulder. “Everything can break! If you ask me…”

She reluctantly brushed off his hand. “But I’m not asking you. You’re a good metallurgist. What you lack is trust.”

“Trust? Listen, this ship is screeching right now as if metal is tearing everywhere, as if someone is grabbing it with a force beyond our imagination! We’re going to crash unless we explode first.”

Her gaze made him feel a contempt that he would never have thought possible. On the flight to Arkonide territory, he had befriended the politician, or so he had thought.

Sven and Fran.

She came from Italy, had studied geography and ecotrophology, and had become involved in politics through her studies. Her career had begun a good ten years ago in some South American country. She had even been Minister of Education and Environment there once, but he had forgotten both the country and her tenure. Living in northern Europe and playing a key role in the large steel mills almost inevitably meant that he had no detailed knowledge of day-to-day politics taking place so far away in a fragmented world.

With Rhodan, it had changed and even more so with the mission of the *Tosoma*. The world was forced together in the face of the galactic star meadow on which they were just taking their first steps. You would see Arkon. New trade links, new technologies; what an unheard-of market.

In the meantime, he would be happy if they arrived safely back on earth. On *Earth*, not Terra. He would probably never quite accept the new designation, although it meant the same thing.

“We’re in the innermost spherical cell,” Fran said, trying to make her voice sound like a sharp rebuke. “All around we have a crumple zone of several dozen meters and then another. It is impossible for us to be endangered.”

He grabbed her by the hand and dragged her a few steps along. “You’re still thinking on a much-too-small scale. Whoever wants to get to us, do you think they would try if they didn’t have a chance of success? We don‘t know anything about the powers we’re getting involved with. Take the Mehandor...”

“Let me go!” Fran said, emphasizing every word like an order. “The Mehandor treated us fairly by their standards. I don’t think we’re fighting them now. Do not spread such panic! We’re safe here.”

The light flickered and the ground shook again. Suddenly, a weight seemed to fall on the people, almost bringing them to their knees.

The pressure absorbers have failed. Or gravitational control is going crazy. He went through the two possibilities that crossed his mind as reasons for what was happening.

Fran groaned. He saw thin lines of blood running out of her eyes and ears.

“Fran!” He wanted to reach for her, but his arms couldn’t hold up against the pull downwards.

Then it was over and normal gravity returned. Francesca stood up and wiped her face so that the thin lines of blood now became painted wounds. Of course, she was unaware of her appearance, but in those moments she seemed frightening to him.

“See? No need to worry. This fairy-tale technology...”

A horrible roar, crunch, and burst swallowed her words. With eyes widened in shock, the pair fell over towards a side wall that was suddenly the floor.

So, it is the artificial gravity that’s gone haywire! thought Nylund as he prepared himself for the pain that would inevitably follow.

It took Rhodan no more than a quick glance at the damage reports to understand the situation: the *Tosoma* was a burning wreck, at best. The protective force field had long since ceased to work, and every halfway well-aimed volley of radiation hit the metal ball and punched or melted holes in the shell. Artificial gravity repeatedly stopped or changed its vector, and further explosions shook the ship.

“Why don’t they end it?” gasped Bull. His gaze wandered desperately through the bridge. Everywhere were error messages, damage reports, and failing repair routines.

Why is he leaning against the wall so strangely? Rhodan thought, but before he could analyze it any further or speak directly to Bull, he was distracted again.

“They want us alive so that they can kill us afterwards,” Thora claimed. But Rhodan saw that this was more wishful thinking and she had only said it so as not to worry the others. “They’re probably making records of it to prove what they’ve done.”

Gucky clung to her leg. “If they really want to catch us alive, they won’t do anything too clever. They could just stop shooting; that would make everything a lot easier!”

“They are Naats,” said Thora, as if that said it all. She actuated several sensor fields one after the other and suppressed curses as they darkened under her fingers.

“The control system is failing,” Bull said, explaining the phenomenon. “I can bridge it and put it on the side console.”

“I’ll take over!” Rhodan hurried over and waited for the controls to activate. Even at a glance, he saw that most of the thrust and correction nozzles no longer worked. They were racing through space without steering wheels. “It’s not just the controls!” he shouted to Thora. “The engine is gone. Three more impulse engines are still getting juice, but the transition engine is unusable.”

“Three will have to be enough,” she replied, coming over to him, pulling Gucky with her. She looked at the ads only briefly. “All right. It’s not hopeless, it’s over. Bull, clear all evacuation routes. If we want to save part of the crew, we only have one try!”

“What are you going to do?” asked Rhodan.

“She wants to set us on a new course with the last three engines and by blowing off another part of the propulsion section to crash neatly on Snowman,” squealed Gucky excitedly, having read

Thora's mind. "Do you think it will work?"

Rhodan closed his eyes. He trusted Thora, Bull and, last but not least, his own abilities. They would make it. "I have to."

Again, a violent blow struck the *Tosoma*, and it sounded like an old Tibetan temple gong.

"No!" cried Thora.

The holos under the central ceiling flickered and went out.

Rhodan felt the touch of a hand, and then suddenly everything became bright and ice cold...

"Emergency! Emergency! Please prepare for evacuation! Emergency! Emergency!" boomed a dark voice. She was speaking Arkonide, but thanks to the translators implanted in all the travelers aboard the *Tosoma*, they understood every word. It was a bit like magic, and Julian Tifflor's head was spinning when he dealt with the theoretical foundations and practical implementation; however, he was pleased that no doubters had blocked the way for this new invention with demands for long-term test series and investigations of possible side effects.

"Quick!" Julian urged his friend, and she did what was humanly possible to scare away their three mutual acquaintances. They had all taken part in several exercises in case of emergency, but then they had known that it was all just a game. In a good mood, they had taken the glowing emergency routes with the other people on board and gathered in front of the rescue slides and capsules. It had been harmless because there was no real danger, and exciting because they could all see and experience a little more of the foreign, far superior technology.

No one expected it to get this serious. The *Tosoma* did not have enough escape pods because the ship had been found practically empty, and they all had to be specially remade. Human ingenuity and Arkonide cutting-edge technology, even with surges of innovation thanks to Topsidans and Ferrons, and all the world's

factories, could not be converted so quickly.

When the situation became clear to them, Felicita had been the first. She had to admit that something was wrong with the *Tosoma* and that Rhodan's whole elaborate plan was in danger of failing, and they had set out in the direction of the designated escape routes.

Suddenly, Julian had ordered a stop.

Ordered. As if I'm squad leader of a military unit...

But he had realized that if worst came to worst, the *Tosoma's* normal rescue capacities would not be sufficient, either for the sheer number of people or within a certain time frame. Consequently, he could only improve everyone's chances of survival by taking his friends and himself out of the equation. And to do that, they had to use an escape route that was not designated as such: one of the operational airlocks.

With the exception of Mildred, the others did not seem particularly inclined to trust him in his assessment of the situation, and as they did not know Mildred very well, her word carried little weight for them in this matter. For Fel, Klaus, and Humpry, he was a friend, a buddy, and not the one who accompanied the awakening of mankind and already survived many an adventure. Nothing really distinguished him from them; rather, he was inferior to them in many ways except for one thing: he had simply been in the right place at the right time.

What a stupid idea to take her with me! the young man thought. *If she doesn't make it, I'll blame myself forever.*

"Mildred, you and Felicita go ahead in the direction of the B237 to the airlock. You know what I mean?"

Mildred nodded energetically and dragged Felicita past him and the other two guys who had been debating the correct strategy. The heavyset one was Klaus Eberhardt, who would not have been expected to mess with the much taller and bulkier Humpry Hifield, of all people.

“But the on-board safety plan says that we have to go to D798 sooner,” Mildred said. “That’s where the next entrances to the safety slides are.”

“What do you want there? We should get ready to defend the ship!” Humpry had a hydrogen peroxide-blonde hedgehog hairstyle and looked like the perfect quarterback even in the thin on-board air of the *Tosoma*.

“We’re not on the field here,” Julian snapped at him.

“That’s why we should use a gun cabinet first,” Humpry insisted.

“No, we have to go to the safety chutes immediately,” Klaus demanded with the persistence of a mule.

Humpry walked quickly over to the cupboard and rattled the door resolutely. “Open it, Jules!”

Julian snapped at his ear from behind. “Hump, just listen to me, okay? Leave the guns where they are.”

The four-faced man, who was about the same age as the others, turned around and glared at Julian. You…shouldn’t…do…that!” he cried angrily.

“Then don’t make me do it!”

Klaus growled something incomprehensible. Then he turned around and stumbled after the two women.

“What a goody two shoes,” said Humpry before turning back to Julian. “Was he like that before or did his physics studies make him stupid?”

Julian shrugged. “Basically, he’s right.”

“But you know better, Jules, don’t you?” Humpry laughed briefly. “We’re going to need weapons, and you know that very well.”

“First of all, the cupboards are locked. Secondly, we have no

time, and third...oh, just listen to me."

"You're just terribly lucky that you're the son of your old man, and that Pounder has taken a liking to you. No one would think of sending greenhorns like you and Millie on the greatest adventure of all time." Humpry grabbed Julian and lifted him up by his hips. "Well, you still have such a big mouth?"

Julian kicked him in the thighs. "You wouldn't be here without me! And now let me down! We have to go to the airlock."

Humpry laughed roughly. "If your age is... All right, come on, Jules. After all, we can't leave the three of them alone." He set Julian down and walked briskly behind the others.

At least now they're doing as I say... Julian thought as he ran after them. *Why not from the start?*

He wondered if his old friend might be right. Until now, he had always taken it for granted that he would venture into space alongside Rhodan, and Mildred was just as natural a companion. He had never seriously wondered why. What had he had to offer half a year ago besides the naivety and enthusiasm of youth? Could he seriously explain to anyone that for the most dangerous missions it was better to choose a greenhorn than a trained specialist? Only with the argument that young eyes, unclouded by experience, sometimes saw the new better and more truthfully?

Wasn't it rather the case that Rhodan and the others had somehow wanted to show their gratitude to Julian's father? William Tifflor had been one of the top lawyers in the United States. His advocacy of Crest da Zoltral had brought him to Rhodan's side. In the meantime, he belonged to the small exclusive circle of coordinators of the young Terran Union and devoted himself to the Herculean task of building a functioning judicial system that met the requirements of the new era.

Had William Tifflor himself influenced the decisions? After all, he had put in a good word for the fact that the friends had been invited to take part in the flight to Arkon. A flight that now threatened to end far before Arkon.

No, it certainly wasn't. Not anymore, anyway. Pounder had had a long, serious conversation with the Tifflors after the near-fatal operation against the Fantan in the Vega system: one after the other, and that time, even the eloquent William Tifflor had kept his mouth shut and only nodded thoughtfully afterwards.

Wanderlust is starsickness, thought Julian. It was a feeling that few felt as burning as he did, even though many millions knew the song. And Pounder saw this wanderlust and knew how to shape it.

"You can learn all sorts of things, but your heart has to stand firm no matter what wind blows in your face. Are you willing to give up everything?"

Julian had hesitated. No, he couldn't imagine doing without Mildred, he said without thinking. Then, immediately, the panic had risen that he had messed up with this honest answer.

But Pounder had only smiled, despite those sad eyes that still saw a loss that lay far in the past. Hadn't the old man once lost his family in an accident? Julian didn't know, it was too far away in too private territory. But he sensed that Pounder was serious when he put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Remember this, boy. There are things you should never sacrifice. A good woman is one of them. And now let's take care of your training, cadet!"

That was months ago. And now his career could quickly come to an end. To prevent this, they had to reach the airlock in B237. The *Tosoma* was on fire, both literally and figuratively. Julian didn't know exactly why, but he could feel that the ship was coming to an end. If he and his friends managed to reach the airlock and equip themselves with the spacesuits stored there, they had a chance to survive the sinking of the 800-meter-diameter spacecraft.

At least that's what he hoped.

When Julian arrived at the airlock, the ship was already creaking in a storm like a windchime two hundred years ago.

"What's that?" Klaus cast uneasy glances at the ceiling.

“It doesn’t matter. Don’t worry about it; you can’t change it anyway. Here, put this on!” Mildred held out a spacesuit to him.

So, there were actually some stored here. Lucky.

Klaus eyed the suit suspiciously. “I thought you have to undress completely first…because of all the tubes and such?”

“Just put it on over your clothes!” commanded Mildred. “Ignore the tubes; there’s no time.”

The chubby young man awkwardly slipped into the spacesuit. He had done much better in training, but this was not training; it was a real emergency.

“Don’t worry,” Julian comforted him. “Hopefully, we won’t have to stay in them too long, you’ll see.”

Humpry slapped the smaller man on the back. “Just don’t go in your pants and it’ll be fine!” He laughed out loud while Klaus lowered his gaze. He had always been the awkward of the youthful trio.

Julian noticed that both of them were scared and couldn’t handle it properly. Involuntarily, he grasped Mildred’s hand. They had both been through the same thing. And it wasn’t even that long ago. When did that change? When had they shed this aspect of their youth? He thought of other people he had met when his father had represented them in court. Among them were some who were supposed to be young in years, but whose eyes were ancient. Would he become one of those? A young man with old eyes?

Mildred returned the familiar pressure of his hand and drew a small heart on the back of it with her index finger.

“I’ll help you,” Felicita said, fixing the suit so that Klaus could finally close it. “See? No problem, it was just something that got tangled.”

However, Klaus did not look at the petite blonde, but kept his gaze fixed on Humpry, who was taking off his shirt. Julian saw Felicita swallow. Was she in love with the uncouth fellow?

Admittedly, Humpry didn't look bad with his bronzed, tight skin over well-trained, unobtrusive muscles. But what would a boxer like him do with the fragile Felicita?

Oh.

He suppressed the images. Some people probably also wondered what Mildred saw in him.

"Are you going to finish soon, Hifield?" asked Mildred. The fact that she didn't use his first name and the way she pronounced "Hifield" betrayed her impatience. "You don't have to take off your clothes, you know?"

He grinned at her in his irresistible way. "I like the feeling of Arkonide high-tech on my body."

Julian frowned. Was the whole world going crazy? The *Tosoma* was hurtling through space uncontrolled, probably towards an icy planet, at least that's what he hoped, because its chances of survival in space were much worse in the long run, and all his friends had to do was...this?

"Let's get into the airlock!" he commanded them in a tone that left no room for doubt or question. This was something he had learned from his father and Pounder. "Close your helmets!"

He felt the ground buckling. For a split second, the artificial gravity failed. He and the others were thrown against the nearest wall, and an iron fist drove the air out of their lungs.

"What...was that?" asked Felicita.

"You don't want to know," Julian said, pushing her forward.

Only when the five had passed through the airlock and were standing in front of one of the transport tubes that connected the inner spherical cell to the fuselage did he breathe a sigh of relief.

"So, don't forget that you can fly with these suits, and they have a protective force field. Don't adjust anything on the suit control; keep it set to intuitive. The suit will automatically recognize what

you want to do."

The Arkonide spacesuits could be controlled in three ways: Intuitive meant that positronics deduced from body language what the wearer wanted. Verbally, on the other hand, positronics only allowed voice commands to be accepted, which could sometimes be much more helpful for experienced wearers in critical missions than intuitive control. And finally, in emergencies, such as the failure of the positronics, the spacesuit could be controlled manually using a kind of joystick.

In addition, if they were in danger, the suits would network autonomously and thus expand their capacities. They would make it, Julian was sure. But he would have much preferred not to have to exhaust the possibilities of the suits.

Outside, on the first spherical shell and the second above it, Julian felt the *Tosoma* quite differently than in the comparatively comfortably furnished center cell.

"Are you sure it's right to be here? I mean, wouldn't the innermost sphere be the best place for us, whether we crash or get shot down? It is best protected." Klaus looked around cautiously. "We're practically stuck between the engines here, aren't we? What happens if a hit gets through?"

Mildred replied for Julian. "First of all, such a hit would have to go through the outermost spherical shell, which is specially designed as a buffer and armored with a particularly large amount of Arkonide steel. Secondly, if someone wants to shoot us down and can do so, it doesn't matter where we are. Third, we're as safe here as anywhere else if our enemy just wants to render us incapable of maneuvering and doesn't intend to blow us to smithereens. And fourth, if we have an accident, the emergency exits will open everywhere, and I'll bet the Arkonides know exactly where they are. But if we come out at a completely different point on the ship, they won't catch us."

"That's right, Millie!" said Humpry, putting an arm around Felicita as if by chance. But there was the same fear in his eyes as in

Klaus's earlier words.

Julian, meanwhile, was working on a status and communication system. Mildred would keep the group together—she was good at that—but if he didn't know how the *Tosoma* was doing, it wouldn't do them any good.

"We're already flying towards the atmosphere of Snowman," he said. "That increases our chances considerably."

Klaus hurried beside him. He narrowed his eyes in confusion at the strange characters. Julian had the data prepared as a graphic instead, and then Klaus understood immediately.

"Entering the atmosphere is a critical maneuver because the frictional forces cause both the ship and surrounding atmosphere to heat up considerably," Julian explained. "But we've done that. Can you show me the trajectory? Thank you!"

Klaus let out a soft whistle. "Our flight angle is about five degrees, so we are guaranteed to land and not bounce off the atmosphere. So that's something. But if the other systems aren't working properly...the frictional heat will easily crack the thirty-thousand-degree mark and the hull temperature the two-thousand-degree mark, no matter how cold it is on Snowman's surface."

The *Tosoma* made a rattling noise and jerked suddenly. The five humans staggered.

"Are we in the atmosphere now?" asked Humpry.

"Looks like it. Now we just hope that the heat protection systems are sufficient," Klaus said calmly. He was again acting as a scientist observing from a distance with cool composure.

Julian shook his head. Of course, the outer shell of the *Tosoma* would be able to withstand this. Were his friends really so naïve as to assume that a spaceship from such a technologically superior race could be compared to the limited possibilities of Earth? The *Tosoma* had certainly survived dozens of space battles, sped across hundreds of light-years, and laid in the deep ocean for thousands of

years. And all this unscathed.

Felicita was standing next to Klaus; Humpry came to her side. They looked strange in the space suits, as if someone had imposed an alien reality on them.

“Look, this graph shows us the current situation. Assuming Snowman was Earth, the air would be coming at us per kilogram with a one-and-a-half-Vau squared. The air, which is completely dammed up on the fuselage, converts this energy into thermal energy...”

“Enough!” said Humpry. “Drop the technobabble and tell us how we’re going to get out of here without being fried.”

“We have to time our transport in such a way that we reach our destination as quickly as possible after landing. And hope that our side of the ship isn’t pointing towards the ground, but rather up. Otherwise, getting out will be difficult. Right, Tiff?” Mildred said.

Humpry looked appraisingly at Julian. “Yes, tell me, Jules. You and Millie are our experts in applied adventure research.”

“Hm,” Julian said, stroking the dark stubble that had appeared on his chin and cheeks that morning. Did a beard make you grow up? As a child, he had believed that. “How long, Klaus?”

Klaus shrugged his shoulders. “A minute, perhaps. Or two. That’s about it, anyway.”

Mildred rolled her eyes. “You scientists are really lost without tables and calculators, aren’t you? Okay, let’s just get into the transport tube and fly off. We won’t get out until we hear a thud.”

“That’s...conceivable,” Julian agreed, and the other three nodded as well. Everyone was glad that they didn’t have to make the decision.

At the touch of a button, they opened the transport capsule. Since they weren’t technicians or officers who could set any stopping point, all they had to do was press the start button, hold on, and the capsule shot up, through the middle and outer spherical

shell of the *Tosoma*, until the door opened into a hangar that was completely empty.

The ceiling was glowing orange-red, and a gaggle of strangled aerial voices filled the room. Through cracks in the wall howled the hot wind that had accumulated on the hull of the crashing ship. Presumably, they had landed in a hangar that did not point directly in the direction of flight; otherwise, everything would have been much worse. It was clear that the force fields had failed.

"Close the door!" Julian ordered.

It clicked, but nothing moved. The door remained open.

Great technology, Julian thought angrily.

"Great plan," grumbled Humpry. He stared into the hangar with his eyes wide open. "What are we doing here?"

"Hold on!" commanded Mildred, just in time, because now there was a terrible jolt, accompanied by thunder, bursting, and a groan the likes of which Julian had never heard before.

His wrists ached as a jolt shook through him. Something exploded under his feet, close enough to break the ground in some places, but also far enough that nothing serious happened to him. A quick glance showed him that the others had also made it without any injuries.

"We landed," Humpry commented. The tip of his nose was unusually pale. "And now?"

"Now we'll wait a moment and then open an outer bulkhead," Julian recommended.

The hot wind had died down, but a cruel cold whistled softly through the cracks. The five young humans were able to watch the glow of the shell subside. The outside temperature dropped rapidly.

"Yes, we've obviously landed." Klaus nodded contentedly. "At two minutes, I was pretty close. Without any instruments."

Julian smiled briefly. That was the Klaus he knew.

Finally, he exchanged a long glance with Mildred. She closed her eyes and smiled.

We can do it.

4.

On Mars

+ + + Dossier from Bradbury Base: Mars + + +

+ + + BR-BA-M 26 — Arsia Mons + + +

In the Tharsis region of Mars lies the fourteen-kilometer-high Arsia Mons, a shield volcano that has been extinct for about a hundred million years and is one of the three Tharsis Montes (mons, montis, Latin for “mountain”). It has a base diameter of 350 kilometers and is the second-largest Martian volcano. The unusual size of the Tharsis shield volcanoes is due to the absence of any plate tectonics. It is considered certain that the strong volcanic activity of the past was caused by an impact.

When the Arsia Mons died out because its magma chamber was empty, the ground collapsed all around and formed a wide caldera a good 110 kilometers in diameter. Cyclonic dust storms regularly occur there after warm, dusty air pushes up the mountain flank at an altitude of up to thirty kilometers. On the slopes of the volcano there are also the “Seven Sisters,” cave entrances of 100 to 250 meters in diameter, which are still largely unexplored.

I have to go! I have to get away! Those were the only thoughts that went through Aescunnar’s mind. Commander Nguyen was dead, and for the historian there was only one explanation for it: Tweel. Tweel, who had almost killed him once before. Whom he would not trust under any circumstances because the being itself literally stank of lies.

He stumbled blindly through the darkness. He had switched off his helmet headlamp so that it would be harder for the others to track him down. He had also switched off the lights inside the helmet, as their glow would only reveal his location. He ignored the fact that he was not actually able to run with the heavy spacesuit.

He just moved, desperately telling himself he had a chance.

How could he get out of this eerie cave of death? He had no idea how far it extended, but he thought he had seen several tunnel openings as they drove in. He looked around, still running, and saw the headlights of the vehicle go out behind him. Had they just gotten out of sight thanks to a rock, or had Tweel knocked them out because he could track him down more easily even in the dark?

Commander Nguyen's horrible face, contorted with nameless horror, wouldn't leave his head. What infinite torments had he felt at the moment of his death, which had blown out the light of his life without damaging the spacesuit?

What secret lies beneath the crust of this world?

He decided, on the off chance it led somewhere, to take a sharp turn to the right. After a few steps, his run ended in front of a rock face.

Aescunnar paused. Listened. Did he hear footsteps, intercepted by the sensors of his suit? He hastily ordered the technological marvel to increase the sensitivity of the sensors.

He listened again. Nothing. Had Tweel and Hetcher run by, or had he escaped them?

Slowly, he felt his way along the rock face. Carefully, he put foot in front of foot.

Just don't make any more noise.

In which direction were the Mars mobiles? He didn't know anymore. He was a historian, not a damned Marsographer.

His fingers reached into the void. He groped around and found a stony edge.

An opening?

Aescunnar did not dare to turn on his helmet headlamp. He had to leave first. Far, far away.

He stood still and listened. Nothing. Just his own panting breath. How long could the suit provide him with air? Five days? Five days, of which...how many hours had already passed?

He had to put distance between himself and his pursuers; that was clear to him. Since he did not know how to get back from the labyrinth of corridors to the surface of Mars, he had to rely on chance and just keep moving. After all, this made him unpredictable for Tweel.

There! Hadn't there been a noise? Aescunnar ducked, although at the same moment, he realized how silly it was.

The sound was a clatter as if from a loose stone, far away and quickly faded. He continued to feel the rock face until he was sure he was standing in front of the entrance to a tunnel. Then he took three deep breaths and disappeared into the unfamiliar corridor. No matter what awaited him there, it couldn't beat his fear of the Death Cave and the creature within.

Aescunnar could feel Tweel getting closer.

The tunnel had several curves and hairpin bends. After walking practically blind for half an hour, the historian took a short break. His whole body burned as if it were on fire. His chest rose and fell rapidly.

What am I doing? I'm killing myself. I'm doing Tweel's work.

Finally, he managed to order the positronics to turn on all helmet displays again.

"I need a map of the surrounding corridors!" he demanded. "Use the echoes if necessary."

Nothing happened.

"Results? Ultrasound?" he tried again.

Function currently not possible, announced a yellow ticker in his helmet display. *The existing damage must first be repaired.*

Aescunnar groaned in horror. “Helmet headlamp on!” he ordered.

The yellow cone of light showed him the red rock of the corridor, the ochre-red dust on the ground, and as he turned his head back and forth, also the torn part of the spacesuit: exactly between the shoulder and elbow of the right side, where he had just crashed into a rock. The outer layers of the fabric were damaged, probably exactly where important sensors or data lines ran. Fortunately, the insulation still seemed to work. It was terrifying to imagine if it had failed and air had escaped...

“Can I at least have a graphical representation of the distances traveled in the last ten hours? To scale?” he asked his suit.

A moment later, he saw a shaky line, which he felt corresponded to the distance traveled. Okay, at least that worked. So he would be able to go the same way. He just had to wait.

A noise startled him. It sounded like...claws on rock. Where had it come from? He frantically waved his headlight, looking for something that had caused the noise but at the same time hoping to find nothing.

The sound came closer.

Had he left any tracks? The dust immediately descended on every footprint it left behind, but what if it was enough for Tweel?

He didn’t think long, quickly turning off the anti-gravity drive of his suit and flying upward. The light from his headlamp danced across the walls, floor, and ceiling, producing more shadows than brightness, but he paid attention to nothing beyond running. He dodged shadows in which he thought he recognized Tweel and rushed through openings wide enough for him, through caves, passages...anything was fine. He wasn’t following any specific direction and didn’t know where he was going. His suit positronics would lead him back.

Twice he ran into rocks with his left and then right shoulder, but he ignored it. He fell down and got up again. If he stopped, he

would die just like Commander Nguyen, he knew that with unshakable certainty. The man had seen or experienced something deeply horrific, something that killed without touching.

Eventually, Aescunnar landed again. This lead had to suffice. Tweel wouldn't find him. He didn't need to strain the suit's precious energy reserves.

He looked at the air indicator. Sixty percent. That wasn't good. Not good at all. He had consumed too much. How many days of air did he have left?

Aescunnar sighed. If he wanted to survive, he needed fresh reserves of breathing air. The only ones he could think of were in the two Mars mobiles. Damn! There had to be another solution. Death lurked where the vehicles sat.

Or weren't they actually the safest place? He had run away from there, and Hetcher and Tweel had followed him. So they couldn't be there anymore.

Yes, that was it. He had to go back to the Mars mobiles! And just as they stretched their awnings outside in the light to recharge their batteries, he would let them supply him with fresh oxygen.

He looked around. For the moment he was safe. Tweel wouldn't find him.

Suddenly, he stopped, noticing part of the rock face...

Carefully, as if he could destroy it, he went to the passage, which was now in the full light of his headlamp.

This couldn't be true... He felt his heartbeat quicken again, but this time it was a very pleasant throbbing.

The corridor was not just any corridor. Something was carved into the stone around the entrance, but it must have been so long ago that you could hardly guess it. Only in one place was a kind of relief recognizable. However, the depiction was so abstract that Aescunnar did not know how to interpret it immediately.

The historian grinned inwardly. So, there had once been life on Mars. Life that produced art. In other words, intelligent life. What would the inhabitants of Mars have looked like? What had driven them, and when had they colonized the Red Planet? What had they called it? When had they disappeared and why?

He reverently ran his thickly gloved fingers over the bas-relief. What a discovery! A curved, branching line, almost like plant tendrils, ran around the confluence. He thought he recognized so much of it, but was this really floral ornamentation? There were indications of that, but everything was so abstract that it could just as easily have been a river course or conduit. He had to try to establish the context of the other pictorial symbols.

Where the keystone would sit in a medieval archway, he also saw a symbol in its place: three wavy lines in a square with rounded corners. *An aquarium?* he thought with a hint of humor. *All that's missing is a goldfish...* It was surrounded by a combination of dots and dashes that looked like a collection of Morse code.

He walked closer to the bas-relief. Different heights at the same depth. Were they insects? Two-part ellipsoidal bodies, each with six times two spindles arranged like bent legs. They could also be symbols of something else, but instinctively Aescunnar knew that they were insects. Unfortunately, there was no scale for size. And the other one was strikingly similar to the Batman symbol. Was that why there were once bats on Mars? Were these insectoids the natives of Mars? The creation of tunnels made it seem at least a conceivable hypothesis. But the overall context was missing. It could also be a depiction of an insect plague during harvesting. Everything depended on how the aliens had thought. If he could succeed in deciphering their language and thinking...

He had the suit positronics take pictures. This archaeological treasure absolutely had to be examined more closely! And where there was such a relief, there had to be more. Maybe one of the other tunnels?

He continued to illuminate the corridor and discovered more openings, but they appeared to be undecorated.

“Strange…” he murmured. The mystery of Mars seemed to be even better hidden than—

At that moment, there was an audible crackle in his helmet speaker, and then a voice shouted, “Cyr! There you are!”

Aescunnar turned around.

5.

On Snowman

+ + + Dossiers of the *Tosoma*: Star Systems + + +

+ + + TO-S 03: Beta-Albireo + + +

also: Albireo, β Cygni

Distance to Sol: 320 light-years (constellation Swan)

Binary star system: orange K0 Sun and blue dwarf star

Number of planets: 4

Special features: The planets orbit the stars on eccentric orbits.

Special notes: In orbit around Planet II (Gedt-Kemar/Snowman, q.v.) *Ke-Matlon* (Interkosmo [see linguistic database]; “the Web”), a staging station for transition spaceships, operated by the Mehandor clan of the Nham (q.v.).

+ + + Cross-References: Sections Planets, Installations + + +

The freezing cold was decidedly real.

Rhodan was no longer on the *Tosoma* bridge. Something or someone had taken him out of there. Now the ship was crashing out of control through the atmosphere towards the planet.

“Gucky!” he shouted. “You shouldn’t have! What’ll happen to everyone else?”

He was standing with Bull, Thora, and a rather exhausted-looking mousebeaver on a cruel white hill of old ice, fresh snow, and a cold that bit into his unprotected skin with a thousand tiny teeth.

Bull had named the planet Snowman, and it was called *Gedt-Kemar* by the Mehandor—which they knew by now also meant "snowman." Even if such a curiosity did not reveal much about the traders, then at least they knew this: obviously, the Nham built snowmen like humans did, or they would not have known this term.

Gucky held Rhodan's hand tightly in his, just like Thora's. The *Tosoma* was quickly approaching as a huge, roaring mass of fiery metal. They felt the hot wind and saw the air vortices, enveloped in swirling snow. When something so big crashed, whether in free fall or not, it didn't happen silently, and only a fool would have thought it was like a football being dropped.

No, the end of the *Tosoma* did not come quietly or quickly, but loudly and agonizingly slowly. All around them was nothing but white ice under a deep-blue sky, in which the distant suns shone like pinheads.

"We should be there," Bull said. His voice cracked. "That's our job."

"You're an ungrateful turnip!" hissed Gucky, more sadly than provocatively. "Be glad we were able to escape!"

"Us, yes, but what about the others? Can't you do anything to help them?"

"I'm unable to stop such a massive thing like the *Tosoma* telekinetically. And my supernatural teleportation muscles were enough for the three of you, but it still wasn't easy."

Gucky looked up at Bull's frozen face. His squeaky voice sounded almost tender as he continued.

"Stubblehead, I know exactly how you feel now. And believe me, if I could do something, I would."

The *Tosoma* flew past them, deceptively slow in front of the infinitely peaceful blue. For anyone who had ever seen how elegantly she sailed across the sky and through space, it was

obvious that this was an uncontrolled flight: she lurched and made small jumps, her fuselage was torn open, and every now and then the fire of an impulse engine shot out and tried to bring about course corrections.

Positronics, as was their job, had to take control after Rhodan, Bull, Thora, and Gucky were no longer on the bridge. But even the highly advanced technology could not save the ship.

"It's pointless," said Thora. The gaze of her red eyes stubbornly followed the *Tosoma's* course. "There's no point in mourning the past, Bull. You should know that. They were deserters, Besun...and certainly some things that I dare not even think, in your still more primitive past."

Bull gave her a scathing look, but she didn't register it. Rhodan knew what was going on inside his friend, because he felt the same way. They had initiated Operation Arkon, they had invited all the people to accompany them: two thousand two hundred individuals; only four hundred of them regular crew members, the rest gifted people from all nations who were to represent Terra before the throne of Arkon.

Look here, Empire, this is us! He had wanted to shout, as it were.

Two thousand two hundred individuals, of whom he had had to abandon a good seven hundred on the Web to an uncertain future because he had refused to take the customs of the Mehandor seriously. Because he had thought he could be better than her, and yet he had just been more cunning.

Two thousand two hundred individuals, of whom fifteen hundred had just rushed to their death. It was his fault, no matter how he twisted and turned it. He was the leader, and therefore the responsibility fell on him.

At least Crest is safe, he thought, and knew at the same moment that this consolation was deceptive. The Naats would not stop at just downing the *Tosoma*. He tried to catch a glimpse of Thora's face without being intrusive. Was this woman really as cold as the world they had landed on? Could she just watch what was happening?

“Thora,” he began hesitantly.

“Yes?” She didn’t look at him, her voice unmoved.

“You shouldn’t look.” He felt chauvinistic as soon as the words were out. He had wanted to say something completely different. “I mean...”

“You are mistaken, Rhodan. I have to look, just like you. Face the consequences of your decisions. You are responsible for the destruction of the *Tosoma* and the death of every single person who will not survive your expedition.”

Bull breathed a sigh of indignation.

“Who really wanted to go to Arkon?” Gucky beeped shrilly. “Ever since I knew what they did to my people ten thousand years ago...”

Rhodan remained calm, observing the smooth, motionless façade behind which Thora was hiding. His friends had only heard what the proud Arkonide had said, but only he seemed to understand the message behind it: she considered herself as guilty as he was, and she was teaching him a lesson in honor and responsibility: *face your responsibilities, but don’t let guilt paralyze you.*

“Are your people going to destroy the *Tosoma*?”

She was silent, then shook her head. “They’re not my people, they’re the Naats. They want us, not our death. At least at the moment. Corpses aren’t very talkative, you know?”

“But your buddies up there aren’t doing much to help the *Tosoma* either,” Bull grumbled.

“No,” she said.

The *Tosoma* made one final course correction; its flight angle became flatter and flatter, then the gigantic burning ball plowed through the ice, turning it into splashing water for seconds, which immediately froze again as soon as the ship had passed through. It

left behind an avenue of elegant, curved semi-arches of ice, and then disappeared.

The ground beneath Rhodan's feet rumbled and shook so much that he lost his balance. Thora and Bull also staggered, and the Arkonide even fell down. Scorching heat rolled over them and almost instantly lost its bite in the icy desert of Gedt-Kemar.

Rhodan helped her up, very wooden, as he himself noticed, but without being able to do anything about it.

"Thank you."

"No problem..."

"Perry!" came Bull's cry. "There!"

The *Tosoma* burst out of the ground with a roar, with three or four flaming impulse engines, floating briefly in the air before crashing into the ice one last time and sinking until the engine rested very much like a collar around the spherical ship. Loud rumbles and grumbles echoed from the wreckage like groans.

"The transition engine," Thora said. "Secondary explosions are now occurring in the middle spherical shell."

"And what about the fusion reactors in the inner shell where our people are?"

"If they're lucky, the structural integrity hasn't been compromised. The core cell will remain self-sufficient. And if Bull followed my instructions, the escape routes are now open."

Rhodan realized that she wasn't telling the whole truth. "Do you have a prognosis for us?"

She shook her head. "In view of the damage, I assume that at least some kinetic energy has penetrated connecting shafts and direct contacts. The *Tosoma* is ten thousand years old and was already damaged when the fighters opened fire."

"Look!" Gucky excitedly pointed to the front where the ship was.

“They’re fleeing!”

People jumped, floated, or ran from small wounds in the mighty metal body of the once-proud ship that had been responsible for protecting Atlantis.

“Let’s go! We have to help them!” Rhodan activated the flight unit of his combat suit and floated into the air. “Close your helmets!”

“An excellent idea,” Gucky agreed. “Otherwise, my breath will freeze into ice cubes.”

“Too bad. I don’t have any whiskey with me,” Bull said, but he imitated the mousebeaver.

Rhodan felt an invisible force pull him back and his flight unit shut down.

“Look!” he warned.

“You’d better look up,” Gucky recommended. “You don’t want to run into them.”

Finally, the *Tosoma* was still. It was over.

“Okay, stay close together. We’re going...” Julian hesitated, looking for the bulkhead he had chosen as soon as they had arrived, because it looked intact. “Over there. I’ll go ahead and out first. Pay close attention and give your suit the command ‘Insole Mode 3’ as soon as we go out. This automatically gives you slight adhesion to Arkon steel, and we’ll save the energy of the traction engines.”

“You want to reduce the risk of detection,” Humpry concluded. “Very clever. And thanks to the stealth coating of our suits, we’re not that easy to track either.”

Julian nodded. They would probably have to resort to the anti-grav feature of the spacesuits anyway if they did not come out in a particularly convenient location. He did not know if and how far the *Tosoma* was stuck in ice and snow, but in the worst case, they

would be eight hundred meters above the ground when they left the ship. They could not survive such a fall. He hoped that they would not have to use the aircraft units, because that would reveal them to enemy locators. In addition, he had another fear: the spacesuits were ten thousand years old, without receiving proper care and maintenance. In an Earthly model, all rubber seals would have broken long ago. What if one of them had lost its flight propulsion?

If it became necessary, they had to try either way...

The *Tosoma* crunched and groaned softly as Julian led his small band to the outer airlock, but those were the only sounds he heard. All machinery on board seemed to have ceased activity.

Julian had become accustomed to the soft, rhythmic tones that usually filled the ship; the soft, rushing melody of the engines, like distant ocean waves. Even the booming, pounding heavy metal concert of the last flight hadn't scared him. Now the music had almost entirely faded away.

Goodbye, pride of the Terran fleet, thought Julian. *You were our only representative ship. My first spaceship...*

He left his gloved hand on the frame of the bulkhead for a moment longer than necessary, almost as if he were caressing the *Tosoma* one last time. He knew how silly it was—especially to think of the old Arkonide ship as his first spaceship—but he felt it was a sad, final farewell to a faithful friend.

"So, here we are," he said firmly. "Let's go outside. Ladies, gentlemen, good luck."

"The Arkonides won't get us," Humpry assured him. He seemed enterprising again. Until now, he had been at the mercy of an overpowering fate, the helpless passenger of a huge spaceship whose commander had overestimated his chances. He knew what was coming next. Close combat. Man against man. Man against Robot. Man against. Nature.

The bulkhead opened. Below them was a yawning of nothingness, above them a huge metallic leg pierced the bright blue

sky. Occasional thin screams rang out; down there, people who had apparently chosen the safe, rehearsed way to escape from the damaged *Tosoma* were running.

Julian leaned out. It went down about twenty meters; that was only two and a half percent compared to the theoretical height, but still too high to take lightly.

Humpry stretched his head out beside him. “And? Problems?”

Julian swallowed. With his eyes and a quick movement of his head, he directed Humpry’s gaze. The prickly-headed boxer, with whom Julian had played games in the rain and chased in the sunshine as a five-year-old, looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

“Yes, and?”

“That’s twenty meters.”

“And this is a spacesuit with an anti-grav module, isn’t it? Tell me, which of us is the space veteran here?”

Of course! Julian grinned. “It was just a test, Hump.”

“What was just a test?” interjected Felicita.

“Nothing,” said Humpry quickly.

“To be honest, Hump has just brought me back from the Stone Age to modernity. In all seriousness, I’d been thinking about where we can get a rope to get to the ground.”

Felicita stared at him as if he had gone crazy. “Uh...hello? Anti-grav?”

Everyone seemed to have thought of it except me, Julian thought, half annoyed, half amused. If he was already embarrassing himself, at least it was among friends. “Now that that’s settled, let’s climb out and turn on the anti-grav module. Set it to zero three, then just jump off the wall.”

“Not zero two?” asked Nylund.

“No,” Klaus replied. “We’ll be too light and too slow. A perfect target for shooters and the wind.”

“Good.” Julian patted his friend on the back. They would make it.

Then they jumped.

Rhodan’s gaze followed Gucky’s fingers: dots that quickly turned into huge spherical objects approached and got stuck in the icy air above their heads.

Eight, Rhodan thought. *Three are still in orbit. Are they afraid of us or do they want to play it safe?*

“If these Arkonides or Naats or anyone else dares to shoot at the ship and our people,” said Gucky, narrowing his eyes into slits, “I’ll pluck those rotten tomatoes of a perverted civilization from the sky one by one and crush them into…whatever you make out of rotten tomatoes. Ketchup?” He glanced at Thora. “Nothing against you, but your people tormented mine quite a bit back then. We Ilts have a long memory.”

Thora just stared back. Rhodan thought he read a silent agony in her eyes, but he was not exactly brilliant at comprehending the feelings and thoughts of the beautiful, cold Arkonide.

“They could have atomized the whole ship long ago. No, it’s exactly as Thora said: they want prisoners to interrogate.” Bull looked from one to the other for a long time. “What’s so interesting about us? Or…Crest?”

Thora twitched. “Leave Crest out of the game!”

“Aha,” Bull said.

Rhodan knew exactly what he was thinking. Thora’s ice sheet began to melt on an ice world, of all places.

The eight ships sank a little lower before opening their floodgates. Robots, soldiers, and small gliders poured onto the

surface of Snowman like rain.

“Rescue crews,” Bull exclaimed. You could hear his relief. “They’re really damn rescue teams!”

“Idiocy doesn’t seem to last over ten thousand years in a people, does it?” said Gucky to no one in particular, though Rhodan almost certainly knew that he was trying to apologize for his words to Thora in this way. “Maybe not all sense has been lost among the Arkonides.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Thora replied. “Quick! We have to move on!”

“Move on?” Bull stared at her incredulously. “Where are you going? Do you know a tavern in this ice hell where they serve a nice hot grog?”

Thora wrinkled her nose, a slight curl only and yet incredibly arrogant. “I’d rather take my chances on that than fall into their hands.”

Gucky imitated her nose-wrinkling. “I correct myself: idiocy does persist over the eons. Tell me, madam: Are you feeling quite well? Do you want to freeze to death here?”

Rhodan, who had so far remained silent and quietly enjoyed the rescue of his people, pushed himself between the mousebeaver and the Arkonide. “I think she knows exactly what she means.”

“What?” exclaimed Bull, Gucky, and Thora at the same time.

“It’s about me. I resisted Novaal, tried to trick him. I even shot at him. If I’m judging him correctly, he won’t let that slide. Right, Thora?”

“Naats know no mercy,” she confirmed. “But there’s another reason: me. As soon as the Regent learns that I am not dead, I will not have long to live...”

“Well, if that’s the case,” Gucky announced, “we should leave at

once. Little jumps with me, a few steps through the snow; we can manage."

Rhodan turned to Bull, who had become strangely silent and was looking at the scene. "Reg, what do you think?"

"I..."

"They've spotted us!" said Thora. A hand twitched to her chest and cramped up. The Arkonide was indeed scared, and it was not unfounded. Several robots were approaching them at high speed.

"Run!"

And with that one word, Bull shot at the robots. Gucky's telekinetic grip came too late.

"Reg!" shouted Rhodan into the radio. "Reg, what are you doing? Come back!"

Rhodan felt a touch on his arm and was gone.

They landed gently on frozen water. Around the *Tosoma*, more than a third of which had sunk into the snowy landscape, snow and ice had evaporated and liquefied, splashing up and turning back into a ring of frozen wave crests as they fell. Almost, Julian thought, as if the badly scratched and partially burst aircraft was wearing a crown of thorns made of ice.

A little farther away, people fled the ship on emergency slides. He saw them running, slipping, screaming. Then came the Naats and the robots: as if out of the blue, they rained down, wave after wave of Arkonide combat robots, interspersed again and again by three-meter-tall black giants.

"We have to get out of here quickly," whispered Felicita.

"That makes us suspicious," said Humpry. "They're guaranteed to be after anyone who flees. We need to be smarter. Thanks to our stealth suits, we're harder to see than the others." He pointed at the fleeing people. "If we move away slowly, they may not notice us."

“And the tracking devices?” Klaus interjected. “We may be able to deceive the Naats’ eyes, but the robots’ sensors?”

“The stealth function of the suits makes it difficult or even impossible to track, especially if we don’t use energy-intensive functions,” Julian said. “Plus, we’re out into the open air quite a bit away from the others. So our chances are clearly better. Not good, but better.”

The others laughed nervously, even Nylund. They set off, slowly, in single file, Julian in front, always away from the *Tosoma*.

Behind them, it was getting loud. There, the people fought against the Empire they had wanted to visit. Everything was going terribly wrong.

Suddenly, three people in combat suits whizzed through the air, just three meters above their heads, and after them came a Naat. The trio fled without turning around, while he shot at them with a large, clunky gun. Directly above the five young people, the Naat stopped, docked, and fired more purposefully. He hit two of the aircraft units in quick succession, which exploded and sent their carriers to the ground as flares.

“If you’d listened to me earlier, we’d have weapons and could interfere now,” Humpry grumbled.

The third human, a woman, turned around in the air and was now running towards the Naat. She, too, had drawn a gun and was firing at her opponent. The Naat did something surprising: he not only dodged, but at the same time made a hurling movement with his free arm. A long, metallic rope whizzed through the air, wrapped around the woman’s legs like a whip cord, and he pulled at it.

The woman crashed back-first onto the snow-dusted ice less than ten meters away from Julian, her gun falling out of her hand and sliding away in a white, powdery cloud of snow.

Klaus saw the opportunity and hurried to grab it. At the same moment, the Naat landed with both feet first, directly in front of the

woman. He laughed loudly.

“Well done,” he said, and it sounded sincere, at least to Julian’s ears. “But now the hunt is over.”

He raised his weapon and aimed at the female human, who was struggling to get to her feet.

“What a...” breathed Humpry.

Two snowballs hissed past him in quick succession, hitting the Naat in the head and right shoulder. Immediately, a force field appeared. “Keep your hands off her!”

Julian was amazed to see that it was Nylund and Felicita who were throwing snowballs at the giant stranger. They distracted him from the woman, but on the other hand, he now turned his attention to them.

They’re insane, he thought.

The Naat was apparently surprised. His clunky weapon swung around. “You’re human too,” he said calmly. “How lucky.”

At that moment, a flash of light struck him. His force field glowed and absorbed the tremendous energy. The Naat staggered a little, but at most like a bare oak tree in a fresh autumn wind. Then, in a single fluid motion, he crouched, spun around, and began shooting back.

A scream rang out, very briefly, and Julian saw his friend fall. *Klaus! You idiot!*

Before he could find time to grieve or get angry, the Naat rushed over; the soldier had taken advantage of the moment and jumped at him from behind. His force field failed under the sheer kinetic force.

“Get him!” roared Humpry, and he ran off. More snowballs and chunks of ice flew through the air, but of course none penetrated the protective force field. However, they did succeed in distracting the giant.

Roaring, the Naat straightened up and was caught in the crossfire of the other two soldiers from the *Tosoma* who must have survived the crash somehow. Julian was astonished when the shimmering force field of the three-eyed alien first turned milkier and then simply burst, as if someone were smashing a mirror.

The Naat cried out and fired two fierce bursts of fire. One of the men died instantly; the other was at least grazed and fell into the snow. The Naat wanted to continue firing, but the soldier jumped into the air, spun around once, and kicked his hand with full force. His weapon fell to the ground, but at the same moment, the giant's second hand closed around the woman's arm. There was an audible crack, and the woman screamed in pain.

Humpry approached and drove first one fist and then the other into the presumed stomach area of the creature. Immediately afterwards, he jumped up and smashed an uppercut into the Naat's chin.

The alien tossed the woman away and hit the cheeky person who had just surprise-attacked him. Julian stood, frozen. That couldn't go well.

Klaus!

He looked over at the smoking bundle of clothes. A spacesuit may provide excellent protection against all sorts of things, but its wearer could not forget to activate its protection as well. Klaus had completely forgotten to turn on his force field, and the mistake had cost him his life. Without that protection, even a high-quality spacesuit like the Arkonide one would not have too much to protect against a thermal beam. Especially not if it broke through the helmet.

Julian stumbled over and tried to wriggle the gun out of Klaus's rigid hand while the soldier was trying to ram a knife into the Naat's thigh with her uninjured hand. The giant, taking advantage of the moment she was distracted, grabbed her wrist and broke it. She cried out, letting go, and a kick from the giant shattered her chest. The cracking did not allow for any other conclusion. She flew to the ground like a broken doll, and the Naat focused on Humpry.

All this had lasted less than two seconds.

Finally, Julian got hold of the weapon. A standard model, set for thermal beams. He only briefly considered whether he should dare to attack the Naat. Klaus had dared and died. Humpry had dared and his life was in danger. If he fell...

Humpry may have been a passable or even good boxer, but that was only true for opponents in his weight class. The Naat was several times taller and Humpry's footwork and agility were enough to allow him to duck, but how long could he keep that up?

Julian took aim and watched as Felicita ran straight into his line of fire towards the combatants.

"Get out of the way!" cried Julian.

"Let him go, you monster!" cried the delicate little woman, striking the Naat with the flat of her hand. He swept her aside with an almost casual movement, and she fell to the ground.

Humpry pranced around the giant, again and again, in and out of the field of fire. Way too fast for a sure shot.

Get out of there! Julian thought.

He saw Nylund turn to him. Her eyes widened. At that moment it happened: the Naat caught Humpry in the middle of a movement and sent him crashing to the ground. The blond remained motionless.

Finally, a clear field of fire...

"Julian!" cried Nylund, pointing at him. Or...behind him?

"Rrrrrrrrrriiiiiiiii!"

6.

On board the Ke-Matlon

+ + + Dossiers of the *Tosoma*: Installations + + +

+ + + TO-I 01 — *Ke-Matlon* + + +

Ke-Matlon, the Web, is a stage station for transition spacecraft, which has existed for several thousand years and has the confusing form of a conglomerate of extensions and additions. The station is considered the home of the Mehandor clan of the Nham and an important supply point, shipyard and transshipment point in this sector of the Great Empire.

Appearance: The *Ke-Matlon's* central unit is a platform (1,500 x 600 meters) mounted on an ancient Mehandor craft (length 700 meters, diameter 200 meters). On this platform is the "Garden of Nham," an artificially created park landscape made from the vegetation of various planets. A transparent roof stretches over the garden, the surface of which faces away from the planet Gedt-Kemar.

Additional cylinders are attached to the central unit at right angles, but in an apparently arbitrary order. Several supply lines several kilometers long and variable tunnels lead from the cylinder units, where spaceships can dock; lines such as tunnels are brightly lit.

Armament: none.

Propulsion: not available, there are only a few correction engines.

Politics: Stations like *Ke-Matlon* can only exist if they are fully committed to neutrality. This is another reason there is a duty of peace on board. Whoever violates them forfeits all rights and, should he succeed in leaving the Web, will never again be able to

use the services of any Mehandor clan. The current leader of the Nham is Matriarch Belinkhar (q.v.).

Prognosis: The neutrality of the Mehandor no longer seems to be enough for the Great Empire. If the establishment of peaceful relations with Arkon fails, the Terran Union could find alternative allies in the Mehandor.

+ + + For blocked information, please submit proof of legitimacy (retina scan, high-ranking code) + + +

How could he have dared?

Belinkhar seethed with anger. She was the matriarch, the mistress of *Ke-Matlon*. Her word was law. Etztak had delivered her to the gallows. He had broken his oaths. He had betrayed her.

Betrayed.

She had sent him away, banishing him from her sight. This was an outrageous punishment, because nothing and no one was allowed to separate the shadow from its commander.

An unprecedented betrayal. Actually, she should have sent him directly to Gedt-Kemar, the world of punishment. She couldn't even blame them for trying to do the same thing. They weren't Mehandor; honor and promises didn't matter to them. She had experienced this several times before, although rarely with such Arkonide-like strangers. The Gorshaman, those mollusks, had tried something similar when she was new in office. To no avail, of course.

She sat in her darkened private quarters. Black velvet panels along the walls muffled all sound, gemstones applied to them refracted the light and sparkled as if space had materialized in her living quarters. Only one monitor flickered, a very old-fashioned, flat screen made of flexible Mehaplast, which she could zoom into different sizes and which was much more robust than all modern holoprojectors.

They don't make them like this nowadays, she thought as she accessed the video transmissions that ran throughout *Ke-Matlon*. The screen had belonged to her grandmother, been passed to her father, then to her sister, and now...

She watched as the *Tosoma* crashed, somehow managing to control its flight path just long enough to impact in a somewhat controlled manner, melting a long death corridor into the ice that surrounded Gedt-Kemar like a tank. A few decades ago, the spacecraft would have crashed into an endless ocean. Despite all the records, it was hard for her to remember what a turquoise, warm, life-teeming world Gedt-Kemar could be.

She saw the crew pouring out of the ship. How many would make it in time? She did not know the structure of the Arkonide ship well enough to be able to make an educated guess. It seemed to Belinkhar like a metaphor for her own situation: betrayed by those she had trusted, checkmated by the Empire.

Specifically, she had betrayed the *Tosoma* by handing her over to the Arkonide Empire. But this had only been necessary after Etztak had betrayed her to Arkon. He no longer wanted to resign himself to his role as a shadow, but make decisions himself.

Damn! How would my sister Gyrikh have acted? She wouldn't have hesitated for a second, I think. Hopefully.

How many deaths had the decisions of the last hour cost? And weren't the dead better off than those who survived the crash on the icy planet? She shuddered at the thought...

Oh Gyrikh...would Etztak have dared to do the same with you? And what would you have done with him?

Silence. Then, *He must feel my anger.*

So, Gyrikh agreed with her. *Absolutely. He will feel my anger. Everyone should know where their place is.*

How? Me too? You too? she replied in her thoughts.

Yes, you're right. I also have my place, and it is not that of an

avenger.

Etztak has served me faithfully.

May I forgive him? She wondered.

Yes. Yes, I will forgive him, but not...

She thought her sister's thoughts through to the end.

...now. Now we have to see to it that we bring peace back to Ke-Matlon*. At the very least, the Naats seem to be launching a rescue mission to save the survivors.*

What other options would there have been? She had to think of *Ke-Matlon* first, and the Web was far from out of danger; after all, eleven warships of the Empire were still scattered around the station. They would be helpless if the Naat decided to make an example.

"Matriarch? A conversation for you," a communication from the bridge said. Belinkhar already suspected who was so important that he was put through to her private quarters. "Link it directly to me."

An invisible wall blocked their way to the *Ke-Matlon's* observatory. Anne Shan-Ti, who was walking at the front, stopped. Their path had already passed through several white tubes, and now, shortly before reaching their destination, they were stopped because of a force field?

The half-Chinese woman looked around. The semi-transparent material of the tube shone evenly from the inside, without her being able to determine whether LED lamps, strip lights, or something else was being used. The floor consisted of grates that looked like new. The technology of spacefaring peoples had already proven to be far superior to any Earthly technology in countless small details, but she did not dare to ask her companions about such trifles. It would have made her seem unnecessarily stupid.

True wisdom makes it possible to perceive even the incomprehensible without amazement, she thought.

“Wait!” Prelate Tatum Moncreiffe puffed behind her. “You’re going too fast for an old woman like me.”

“For me too!” Razafimanantsoa made a moaning sound. “These Nham outfits are more impractical than I thought. I get stuck everywhere. Even around curves.”

The tall man—everything about him was broad: the face, the shoulders, the belly, and even the smile—his skin almost exactly the same tone as the milk chocolate he ate incessantly, whenever possible, kept to the side.

“In any case, I’ve now learned that curves can have corners.” He grinned and rolled up his sleeves. The brightly colored robe, decorated with dozens of glittering zippers, buttons, borders, fringes, and tassels, was made of a very soft, flowing fabric and left a tiny air cushion between the skin and the cloth so that the obese Malagasy man did not sweat as easily.

Shan-Ti had only met him on board *Ke-Matlon* despite their joint voyage on the *Tosoma*. She would never forget their encounter. She had just decided to take a look around on her own when she had practically walked into Razafimanantsoa, who was negotiating with one of the delicately built Nham for the garment he was now wearing.

Razafimanantsoa had grabbed the unsuspecting Shan-Ti by the arm, pushed her in front of the Nham, and asked, “Tell me, sister of the Earth, do you really think this robe is worth as much as this?”

He had swung an arm-length, richly decorated black wooden stick, which ended in a comfortable handle at the top. Shan-Ti had recognized the stylized but easily recognizable lemurs, fossa, frogs, even the long-extinct ratite, and identified the origin of the obese man: Madagascar.

By now, she knew that Razafimanantsoa had grown up as the son of a Malagasy diplomat. After coming of age, he had spent a good twenty years traveling the world and exchanging ideas with members of other religious communities. Rhodan had invited him, as well as Shan-Ti, Tatum, and about eight hundred others, to

enrich the *Tosoma's* crew and stand before Arkon's throne to represent the peaceful diversity of Earth.

"My dear guests and friends," came the voice of their guide, amplified by a small loudspeaker, "we must hurry. And, with all due respect, my legs are much shorter than yours."

Razafimanantsoa quickly stuffed a bar of chocolate into his mouth from a lilac foil package. Shan-Ti tried hard not to look too judgmental.

"You're forgetting the floating disk," said Moncreiffe, fiddling with the silver crucifix that dangled from a narrow metal chain on her neck. She ran her other hand through her mottled gray hair in an affected gesture, combing it out of her sweaty, shimmering face. She wore a white ruffled collar with a black blouse with a black vest, black trousers, and black, shiny patent leather shoes with heels nearly up to her ankles.

Not exactly what to wear aboard an alien space station, Shan-Ti thought, *but she doesn't hide or change just to please others.*

Schallempak twitched all four arms, and his anti-grav disc hummed on the spot for a moment. "Forgive me for this unforgivable thoughtlessness, but the capabilities of my vehicle are unsuitable for a larger-scaled user, rest assured."

Razafimanantsoa laughed loudly and deeply. "Little Swoon, big mouth."

"I don't understand," said Schallempak. He was only about thirty centimeters tall, and if he hadn't had four pairs of arms, two legs, two eyes, a mouth, and a brownish tuft of hair on the top of his body, he would have passed for a neat cucumber. The Swoon, as Schallempak's people called themselves, had joined the three people at one of the many small itinerant bazaars that were common on *Ke-Matlon*.

Schallempak had been conscripted to seven years of service with the Mehandor as the price for a large cargo of special minerals and had already completed five years. He worked in one of the station's

observatories, where he was responsible for maintenance and innovation, he explained. According to him, the Swoon were popular throughout the imperial region as technicians and engineers, because their small size, fantastic sensitivity, and phenomenal technical understanding predestined them to be microtechnicians.

"It's only a few more steps and you'll meet the old Arkonide."

Shan-Ti could see Moncreiffe was looking forward to it. She had tried in vain throughout the flight to talk to the immortal Crest and engage him in a discussion about his new status and mysterious patron. And now she had the chance to meet him. Schallempak had told of the ancient Arkonide who had come to the observatory to "be close to immortality," as he claimed.

"Then...come on!" commanded Moncreiffe.

Shan-Ti stopped them. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but a force field is blocking our way."

Schallempak wrinkled the dark green skin along the entire length of his body. "Something like that...isn't supposed to be there. A force field?" He buzzed on his flying disc in front of the obstacle. "Yes. A force field. Wait." He fiddled with his almost invisible headset and listened to voices that the others could not hear. After less than a minute he said, "Actually, I should arrest you right now, dear friends and guests. You are among the Seventh. The Matriarch ordered it. The force fields will help to arrest you more quickly."

"Arrest us?" Razafimanantsoa puffed and choked out the sound with another piece of chocolate. "Outrageous! What's the point of this nonsense with the Seventh?"

Shan-Ti made an effort to remain calm. "As payment for the repair of the *Tosoma*, the Mehandor have demanded that one in seven remain on board the Web for seven years. Your work, impulses, and ideas are the real reward. Weren't you paying attention when the announcement came? Haven't you read your memos?"

“Memos? Bah, I always delete them right away. If it’s important, it’ll find a way to me,” the Malagasy replied. He hesitated for a moment. “And why does the Matriarch want to arrest us?”

Shan-Ti nodded. “That’s a good, legitimate question.”

“Your leader tried to break the contract,” Schallempak replied gravely. “That’s a bad thing. Rude, downright. You don’t cheat the Mehandor, didn’t you know that? Dear Swaat ghosts, who would come up with such a stupid idea?”

Razafimanantsoa made a helpless hand gesture. “It must be a mistake. Perry Rhodan would never break his word.”

Moncreiffe, the prelate, shook her head. She said what Shan-Ti was thinking. “Yes, he would. On our account. It’s his ethical attitude.”

“We don’t mean anything,” Razafimanantsoa objected. “Our lives are in the hands of Zanahary, even though he does not care about the individual. And so does Rhodan. He has to keep an eye on the big picture.”

“Don’t equate a man with a god, even if it’s the wrong one!” Moncreiffe snapped at him.

Shan-Ti interrupted them before the discussion became too theological. That tended to happen with the Christian woman and the “shaman,” as Razafimanantsoa called himself, if you were not careful. She had already learned that in the short time they had known each other.

“I agree with you that a politician, like a military leader, must have the common good in mind. Rhodan found himself in a dilemma: the overall well-being of the expedition as such on the one hand versus the overall well-being of all participants in the expedition on the other. He chose the participants, breaking a contract. Such behavior makes you lose face, no matter what the motives are behind it.”

“You and your unfathomable Asiatic wisdom!” said Moncreiffe.

“If you believe that, you don’t know Mr. Rhodan very well. He’s too much of a good person. He grew up in the Christian faith. He cares about people and would even be willing to die for them. He can’t set lives off against each other.”

The Malagasy stared at her, and for a moment even his chewing movements froze, creating an extremely interesting facial expression, Shan-Ti found. “Do you really believe that? That your religion has something to do with it? The same belief that contributed significantly to the demise of ancient cultures and the killing of thousands of people?”

“Every religion goes through phases of doubt and refinement. We are human beings, and we are evolving. A good person in his darkest urge is well aware of the right path, they say in Central Europe; didn’t you know that? We are responsible for the consequences of our actions, but we must not ignore the motive either. Rhodan didn’t want to leave us behind.” The silver crucifix gleamed slightly as she twisted it between her fingers.

How strange we all still are to each other, Shan-Ti thought. *All of a sudden, everyone is talking about “the Terrans,” but what are we worth if we don’t even get along with each other?*

“So you assume that your leader was worried about your welfare here?” Schallempak’s quiet voice suddenly sounded very warm and pleasant. “I can assure you that your period of service includes extensive social benefits as well as all conceivable freedoms, with the exception of freedom to travel.”

He looked from one to the other and sighed.

“Almost everyone benefits from it, and so do you. But let’s not stand around here. You haven’t done anything to me, so it probably doesn’t matter if I’m keeping an eye on you here in a connecting tunnel or in the observatory. Besides, I promised to take you to the old man. And a Swoon keeps his word!”

He spun once on his own axis while pulling a small encoder out of his pocket, and froze unabashedly.

“Oh no,” he said. “That’s not good. Not good at all. Quick!” He pointed to the protective screen with the encoder, and it disappeared. “Come. It’s not far.”

Shan-Ti looked in the same direction as Schallempak and felt the blood drain from her face. “Yes, we should hurry.”

Through a window element, she saw a jagged, glowing piece of metal slowly approaching, deceptively beautiful. It rolled over several times and trundled leisurely up. Where had it come from? Shan-Ti had a hunch…

“Hurry up.”

“I greet you, Matriarch. You made the right decision.”

The head of the Naats appeared in front of her as a holoprojection at the same time as she heard the words. She looked at him closely.

A Naat. One of…billions? A lackey of the Regent, nothing more. And that’s what made him so dangerous. He wouldn’t hesitate for a second to obey orders from his higher authority; she was sure of it.

“Who are you to judge that? I suppose you don’t find anything wrong with threatening a neutral station with your squadron and making unreasonable demands?” She made no effort to hide her anger.

The three-eyed face showed no emotion. Only the lips moved, whisper quiet, while the tones were full and booming. “Speaking of the Regent’s demands, have the crew members of the *Tosoma* who remain on *Ke-Matlon* ready for extradition. One of my ships will pick them up as soon as our business on Gedt-Kemar is settled. An unusually playful name for such a murderous planet, don’t you think?”

Belinkhar felt her legs tremble. She just couldn’t grasp the feeling that led her to it: anger, fear, excitement, shame? She rose from her chair and stood up straight, her face turned towards Naat.

“You’ve already gone too far. Don’t make your situation worse! You have broken galactic law! We Mehandor are neutral. We do not tolerate armed forces in our region!”

The Naat was silent for a moment. Had she made her point? If that was the case, it had been easier than expected.

“Well,” said the Naat at last, pausing again. The three-eyed gaze wandered, and she knew that he was looking at either her holo or other holos in his command center. “I’m curious to know how you’re going to prevent me from using my squadron’s power in the most efficient way.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” She hit his head, but of course the blow went through the light projection.

“Do what is asked of you. I need everyone who has arrived with the *Tosoma*. In particular, I will check whether the commander who pretended to be Tiara da Intral, as well as an elderly Arkonide, who must have been with her, are also brought on board my ship.”

Ah…there it is. So that’s what you’re after. Why them? What secrets do they possess? The fact that she had been lied to did not bother Belinkhar. In the years in which she had roamed the galaxy alone as a cheater, she had experienced first-hand the whole spectrum of behavior that intelligent beings were capable of. And she had the experience to know that she herself did not shy away from any means when it came to survival.

“Tiara da Intral lied to me?” she said aloud, feigning indignation.

“That’s right. She is the noblewoman Thora da Zoltral. According to my information, her foster father Crest da Zoltral never leaves her side. The two are wanted.”

“For what?”

“That is none of your concern.”

“That is not enough information. I am the Matriarch of *Ke-Matlon*. I have the right to complain directly to your superior and even to the Regent.” She sat down again.

He won't dare to destroy all of Ke-Matlon *just to silence me. That would raise more questions than anything else.*

"That's up to you," the Naat confirmed surprisingly quickly. "Immediately after the end of this operation. But before you formulate your complaint, I would like to point out that it is not us, but the *Tosoma* who began this fight. Their attempt to escape left us no choice but to open fire. The *Tosoma* then set course for the Web. If my excellent gunners had not reacted with presence of mind and diverted the ship from its collision course with a well-aimed volley, all that would be left of your conglomerate and yourself at this moment would be glowing wreckage."

Belinkhar forced herself to remain calm. "That's pure speculation!"

"No, it's a fact," Novaal said calmly. "Of course, I'll give you access to the relevant data files, Matriarch."

Which you're probably falsifying right now, Belinkhar thought. She knew when she had lost. "I will act according to your wishes, Reekha."

With a single wave of her hand, she terminated the connection.

7.

On Mars

+ + + Dossiers of the Bradbury Base: Personnel + + +

+ + + BR-BA-P 18 — Hetcher + + +

Ferron (see Vega-System/Ferrol)

Age and biographical information: unknown

Height 1.55 meters, weight 64 kilograms

Special features: deaf and dumb

Prognosis: Due to a lack of other talents, H. is primarily used for patrol and cleaning purposes.

"Cyr!"

Aescunnar froze inside. *Maybe he hasn't seen me,* he hoped for a ridiculously tiny moment.

But Hetcher approached him and hope crumbled, giving way to a completely different feeling, which spread like a rapidly growing pit in his stomach throughout his body, without him being able to do anything about it.

Yes, it was the Ferron, a human-like figure, a little too wide and a little too small, the proportions not quite right for an Earthling. Aescunnar recognized him immediately.

Oh, you sweet universe, save me. I just have a little... He looked at his watch. He had spent four hours looking at the reliefs, and thus allowed them to find him. Hetcher and Tweel.

But...where was Tweel?

Only a few steps separated him from Hetcher now. Instinctively, the historian backed away. Running seemed like an excellent idea to him, but impossible at these distances. Hetcher would catch up before he had even reached one of the tunnel entrances.

"Hetcher!" He tried to sound pleased but immediately heard that it failed. And above all, how it failed. He sounded like an old woman, with a croaking alto; nothing was left of his rich tenor tone.

What is happening here with me, with all of us? What forbidden spell does Mars cast upon us?

Wasn't the color of blood associated with this planet by chance? Bizarrely, the thought of a completely different, ancient culture came to Aescunnar, and he imagined a person hovering over Hetcher for seconds; just as small, with dirty hair, a face encrusted with old, black blood, and an obsidian dagger in his hand. In the background, he saw a step pyramid under a blue sky.

No! He pushed the thought away. Why was he thinking of the Aztecs? Hetcher was not an Aztec priest who would offer blood sacrifices to the land to make it fertile. What else did the Aztecs call it? Gemstone water. The most precious commodity of every human being and the only one that fell like rain, and which, like rain, would elicit its precious fruits from the land.

Was that Mars?

He felt the panic freeze him and let his thoughts run around in circles endlessly, faster and faster.

No!

Once again he braced himself against the terrible despair and this dark premonition of an unnamed horror that lurked behind a crack in reality, sometimes only very gently running over his face with smoky tentacle arms. He thought of Pickman's Model, a horror story he had read once in his youth. As a matter of course, the name of the author was Howard Philips Lovecraft. He had lived at the turn of the century before the great World Wars and died impoverished like so many others of his time.

Vague images of related art, names of other artists, and related themes bounced around his mind chaotically. All too often, when Aescunnar pondered, tried to remember, it was as if someone were tearing open several drawers, and some of them so far that the stuffed, compressed contents jumped out and tangled into a chaotic pile on the floor. Perhaps this was responsible for his volatility and lack of concentration when something took too long or turned out not to be important enough, but he had learned to master it over the years.

In this last moment of his life, such old habits came to light again like little devils. *Pickman's Model...Lovecraft...*

"Cyr? Don't you recognize me?"

Hetcher continued to approach him, and just as he remembered what disturbed him so much about this familiar, basically harmless sight, a flash of thought struck him full of clarity, but also so unbearably glaring that it hid all other thoughts. It wasn't much, just a quote from that very writer, but it fit so seamlessly into his own situation that he felt dizzy.

"The oldest and strongest emotion of man is fear, and the oldest and strongest form of fear is the fear of the unknown."

That was what paralyzed him: the unknown and his own projections.

Good! he thought resolutely. *I will not allow myself to be dominated by something as primitive as primal fear.*

"Hetcher!" he cried, and felt his contralto voice give way to tenor again.

"Yes."

The addressee in the clunky spacesuit came closer.

Hetcher was beaming all over. "It's a miracle that I found you," he said.

Blind spots still flickered in Aescunnar's mind from his flash of

inspiration, which had calmed him down and prepared him for this encounter. But in his stomach there was an unpleasant pulling.

He ignored it. Fear was not allowed to win. He nodded and spread his arms in greeting. “I have seldom been so glad to see you. You alone.” He turned his gaze scrutinizingly.

“Don’t worry,” Hetcher said hastily. “I’m alone. I realized that... That it was all a huge mistake. Tweel wouldn’t have been at all...”

He was silent, and at that moment Aescunnar felt something familiar between the two of them, which at the same time made the last few seconds seem unspeakably strange. He lowered his arms.

“What about Tweel?” he asked sharply.

He sensed that this was the wrong question but did not know why. Desperately, he searched for the blind spots.

Hetcher looked around hastily and almost stealthily. “Nothing. Anymore.”

“What do you mean? Is he...it...here?” Aescunnar looked around anxiously.

“No. At least I hope not. He was following you, you know?”

“Yes.” He let his helmet headlight circle, pointing it searchingly into the darkness behind Hetcher. But there was no one, only the shadows that had fooled him several times.

“I hope you know that I never meant to kill you. That was Tweel.” The Ferron’s fingers moved and danced, accompanying his statement.

“Sure.” Aescunnar took a step aside. He felt the rock against his back.

Dead end!

Now all that remained for him was to move forward.

“You even saved me from him.”

“Twice,” said Hetcher.

“Twice?” echoed Aescunnar.

“When you ran away, Tweel immediately followed you. I stayed near the Mars mobiles because I wanted to know what scared you so much. And there…that’s when I found him.”

“Commander Nguyen.”

“Yes.” Hetcher nodded slowly. “Something like that…his facial expression…I’ve never seen it before. I didn’t want it to happen again. I…got scared and ran away. By Thort, I hope I’ll be spared that.”

For a moment, curiosity pushed back up; that one emotion the historian could never completely suppress. The one that had led him to all the places that had given him so much joy, at least in retrospect.

“If only we knew what he died of. You don’t know it any more than I do, do you?”

Hetcher nodded again. “I’d like to know. Just like you. And you’d like to know what Tweel was.”

“You wanted to tell me why you saved me a second time.”

Hetcher was silent. He seemed uncomfortable.

“Wait a minute. You just said ‘what Tweel was.’ Does that mean he doesn’t exist anymore?”

Hetcher looked at him, despair in his eyes, and nodded. Aescunnar could hardly believe it. Had the Ferron finally turned against this strange creature?

“You’ve got Tweel…killed?”

Hetcher lowered his gaze. Was that a nod, that barely

perceptible movement of the head?

“You…killed a living creature?”

“I had to do what was right. I…” The Ferron’s voice faded into a murmur and then trailed off.

He killed Tweel. He saved me from that sinister creature.

Silence flooded the corridor, the whole universe even.

“Thank you!”

Hetcher merely nodded.

“Thank you for doing that for me! And for looking for me and finding me. How did you do that?”

Hetcher looked around. “I don’t know. I can do it. But it was…difficult. “Are you okay?”

Aescunnar was surprised. Was he okay? Yes, if he thought about it. He was fine, and he was getting better by the minute. He could trust Hetcher. No one else was there.

“But I found something else. Look!” Aescunnar walked up to Hetcher, past him, and pointed to the bas-relief on the wall.

Hetcher’s eyes widened. “Oh!” Then, after a pause, “What does it mean?”

“I don’t know. Not yet. But in general, it is said that there was once life on Mars. Perhaps Tweel was a descendant of the ancient Martians?”

Hetcher shook his head decidedly. “No. Definitely not. These patterns…do you seriously think Tweel could have created such a thing?” He pointed to the insects, the bats, the ornaments. “They’re not beings like Tweel. I don’t see beaks or feathers or claws anywhere, or…”

Aescunnar spread his arms. “Does anything else sound familiar

to you from your trips across Mars?"

Hetcher frowned. "No. Not that I know of. But it's strange that you'd come across something like this down here."

Aescunnar didn't let up. "You could help me a lot in deciphering this message if you could tell me a little more about Tweel. You met him, didn't you?"

"No, I'm sorry. All I know is..." He faltered, his hands remained motionless. "I know far too little."

Aescunnar froze. The blind spots of thought were suddenly gone. "Hetcher?"

The Ferron looked at him irritated. "Yes?"

"It's unbelievable. You're...speaking. You're moving your lips and I can hear you."

An expression came over Hetcher's face that was almost frighteningly similar to the one Nguyen's face had shown. But then it was gone. The Ferron frowned and said slowly, emphasizing each word, "Yes... Yes, you're right!"

"How can that be?"

Hetcher looked at him helplessly. He looked like someone who had just had the rug pulled out from under his feet. "I... don't know."

Aescunnar could understand how he felt. Finally, he could speak! A miracle...and that certainly worried him. What had happened? What had cured his muteness? Had it been the sight of dead Nguyen? Or had Tweel's death unleashed some mysterious power? But how could this have happened?

Aescunnar was not a doctor. All he had to offer was speculation based on partial knowledge. Consequently, there was no point in wasting one's energy on this puzzle at the moment. Other questions were much more pressing.

“My oxygen will last for another two days. And yours?”

Hetcher looked at his indicator. His eyes took on a pensive expression. Then he replied, “Three. Maybe.”

“I suggest we go back to the vehicles. There, we can supply ourselves with fresh oxygen.”

“And your sensational find?”

“I’ve saved it all,” Aescunnar explained. “My suit doesn’t forget anything.”

“Then I suppose we can go.” Hetcher looked around, pondering. His gaze fixed on the bas-relief, and his pupils shrank.

He knows something, the historian thought, *but he’s not sure.*

“We have no choice if we want to survive, do we?”

Hetcher seemed to be about to give a long reply, but when he opened his mouth, he uttered only one word: “No.”

8.

On Snowman

+ + + Dossier of the *Tosoma*: Spaceships + + +

+ + + TO-R 04 — Structure of the *Tosoma* + + +

The *Tosoma* consists of three spherical shells and a ring bead:

Inner sphere (300 meters): headquarters, fusion reactors (2), pressure absorbers (98), crew quarters, military hospitals (4), storage warehouses, kitchens, common areas

Medium spherical shell (150): Transition engine

Outer spherical shell (100 meters): dinghies (currently: none), protective shield generators (16), armament (s. d.), other, non-vital facilities; escape pods

Ring bead: Impulse engines (16)

Outer armor: Arkon steel (1.89 meters), telescopic landing supports (12)

Weapon systems: thermal guns (12), disintegrator guns (12), torpedo bays (24), protective shield

Crew: 130 (min.)

A teleporter jump. Again and yet again at the wrong moment.

“Look!” cried Rhodan energetically.

In the distance, as the last sign of the *Tosoma,* they saw a weakening column of smoke pointing into the clear sky. Two smaller spaceships of the Arkonide squadron swooped down, but what exactly they were doing there, Rhodan couldn’t see.

“What did you do? Couldn’t you stop Reg instead of jumping away with us?”

“I’m doing what Reg wanted: getting you two to safety!” hissed the mousebeaver. His eyes shimmered moistly. “We didn’t have time to discuss.”

What did Reg want? Rhodan thought before asking, “You overheard him?”

“He literally forced his thoughts on me. But now let me do my job. I need to get Reg. He provided the necessary distraction.”

Gucky turned around and pointed the way to Rhodan and Thora. His chest rose and fell rapidly as he breathed hard. He trembled slightly. Was he really that exhausted?

Rhodan switched his helmet visor to zoom in and pulled out the image. Back there, at a distance he simply couldn’t estimate on this unrelated ice planet, Bull was fighting the Empire’s combat robots. Well, actually, he wasn’t fighting. At first, he moved as if he wanted to ram them, then he turned away and fled with the help of his suit drive, hitting hooks like a hare and luring them farther and farther away.

The robots were actually following him! Not a single one stayed behind to take care of the others and look for them.

“He shows courage,” Thora said. “But it may be that courage alone is not enough. All of you check if your suits are working properly. A single flaw in the stealth coating and the risk of detection increases. To be on the safe side, we should put even more distance between us. Look, can you…”

“Get Bull first. Must…just briefly…catch my breath. Now.”

Gucky disappeared without warning as he always did when he teleported. But a blink of an eye later, he reappeared and tipped over.

“What’s the matter?”

Gucky rolled onto the ground. “I know...not. I thought I could do it!”

Rhodan got down onto his knees. “Look, Reginald needs you. You have to help him! Bring him to us!”

“I...”

Thora also sank to the ground. She used her glove to establish a communication link to Gucky’s spacesuit. “Code AutoMed Alpha.”

“Ouch!” said Gucky a moment later. “Something pricked me!”

“You’ll feel better in a minute,” Thora promised. “And then you’ll get Bull.”

Gucky took a deep breath. “I don’t want to know what kind of Arkonide chemical cocktail you just gave me, but whatever it was, it’s helping. And now I’m going to get Reg!”

He turned around searchingly. Rhodan pointed his finger at Bull’s flight path.

“Ah yes. I’ll head towards him. But...no! Take a look around! Dodge, dodge, Reg!”

Rhodan felt a lump in his stomach and a cramp in his side. As a helpless spectator, he watched as the robots that had been chasing Bull so far suddenly fanned out and opened fire together. The glaring paths of light were not to be misunderstood; they directed ultra-hot, deadly beams of energy at the fleeing astronaut.

A moment later, he was gone.

“That’s a trick, isn’t it?” asked Thora. Her voice sounded brittle, like thin ice over a black, deep lake.

Robots circled over the place where Bull had just stood. It was a strange movement, so calm and steady, judging by the flight maneuvers of the last few seconds, that everyone knew the hunt for Reginald Bull was over.

“His suit failed,” said Rhodan tonelessly. “Or he fainted.”

Thora didn’t look at him. Her gaze remained fixed on the spot where Bull’s last act had taken place. “The hot jets of energy made the ice evaporate, and Bull fell in and...”

Her voice trailed off.

Rhodan looked at Gucky. He radiated so much sadness and despair that there would have been no need for the following words.

“Reg’s thoughts...they’re gone!”

Rhodan stood rigid. *No. Reg...it’s possible that he might have been caught. A future without Reginald Bull...no.*

“You must be wrong, Gucky. It’s possible that he’s just unconscious, isn’t it? You...”

Gucky turned around. He sobbed heartbreakingly. “It was a matter of seconds. Damn weakness! Damn Arkonides! Damn!”

Still Rhodan just stood there, unable to move. “You’re wrong.”

“Don’t you get it? I was there! I heard his terrible cry of pain and then nothing. Nothing.”

“He might be unconscious,” Rhodan insisted. “Take me there. Now.”

Thora turned around. Her eyes were red, as if all the blood from her pressed lips had flowed into them. “No.”

“No?” Rhodan turned around. “How can you say that?”

She didn’t turn her head away, didn’t lower her gaze. Her eyes captivated him on the spot. “You can’t go there. Not as long as the robots are circling. And...what do you think you can achieve? The only thing that is certain is that you are dishonoring Reginald Bull’s sacrifice.”

The wind came up, blowing in from the place where the *Tosoma* had first sunk and Reginald Bull had died. In their closed spacesuits, the three castaways did not feel the cold grip of the wind. Gray clouds swelled up on the horizon and chased snow across the ice-armored landscape.

Thora stepped up to Rhodan and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. “We have to go on, even if it’s difficult for you. Bull would have wanted it that way...”

“No. We’re going back.” Rhodan stiffened, turned away, and clenched his drooping hands.

Gucky sighed. “We’re not going to do that. Thora is right and you know it. You would dishonor Bull’s sacrifice.”

Rhodan blinked. His eyes watered. “What does that mean?”

“I understand a little bit about it,” said Gucky quietly. “Reginald Bull was a hero. His death was certain. And we’re going to go now.”

And with that, his shoulders slumped, he trudged through the snow towards the distant horizon, away from the burning *Tosoma*.

“What?” Rhodan ran after him. “What did you say? Wait, damn it!”

For a moment, he almost sounded like Bull. He stumbled upon that thought.

As if I’ve accepted that he’s dead...

He was not ashamed of the single tear that flowed from his right eye.

9.

On Mars

+ + + Dossier Bradbury Base: Equipment + + +

+ + + BR-BA 16 — Protective suit Planetary A + + +

Airtight suit to protect against cold, heat, vacuum, and, in limited quantities, radiation; standard equipment for Mars expeditions until protective suits based on Arkonide technology are available.

Weight: 25.3 kg

Available in white, beige, ivory

Equipment: Breathing air reserves for two days per cartridge (magazine optional), helmet radio, helmet headlights, integrated disposal of feces

"It doesn't add up," Aescunnar mused. He only noticed that he had spoken aloud when the words echoed in his helmet radio, as if an echo effect had crept in somewhere. He limped behind Hetcher, glad that he had taken the lead. On his own, positronics or not, he would have been completely overwhelmed. Lord, he was a historian, not a boy scout!

That Tweel should be dead was unimaginable. He wouldn't have expected the Ferron to have so much energy and power. Was he bluffing and luring him into a trap where Tweel was already lurking?

No. Pull yourself together, there's no evidence of that. Quite the opposite, actually.

He tried to follow his instincts, but they only advised him to look for more bas-reliefs or paintings on the walls.

“What’s not adding up for you?” inquired Hetcher over his shoulder.

“Tweel,” Aescunnar specified. “Its very existence is impossible. I couldn’t believe that such a thing could really exist, and that’s exactly how it feels to know it’s supposed to be dead. Kind of absurd, isn’t it? Something that isn’t alive can’t die.”

Hetcher grumbled something indistinct. He didn’t sound convinced. Then he stopped. They had reached another small cave with three tunnels branching out.

Aescunnar looked at them closely, following the Ferron’s gaze. Finally, Hetcher pointed to the left.

“This way.”

“Wait, I’ll tell you how I see it: How can there be a creature that looks pretty much like the character Tweel from a story that’s over a hundred years old? How could a gentleman from Kentucky have known what a Martian creature looked like? Was Stanley Grauman Weinbaum on Mars? We don’t know for sure, of course, but in all likelihood, he never set foot on Mars. And even if he did, Tweel is unlikely to have lived long enough to have met him in the 1930s and still exist today. Conclusion: Tweel borrowed his name and form from our thoughts...”

“I’m not a particular fan of such speculation. We have hardly any evidence, and what we do know is as vague as Tweel himself. Who says it’s an individual? Or that some wormhole effect didn’t bring it to Mars for a short while? Not that I think so, but it could be possible, right? And Tweel would then be the great-grandson of the creature that Weinbaum described.” Hetcher turned right. “This is no less improbable than a Martian, who can define his form according to the thoughts of his counterpart. In any case, there was no such thing in the Vega system, as far as I know, and there we have quite a few planets that carry very different life forms.”

The tunnel went slightly downhill and they followed it. Aescunnar was fascinated to see that there was an implied line on the left side at knee height. It wasn’t clearly of artificial origin, but

it didn't seem like it was created naturally either. Was there a connection to the bas-relief? He turned on the helmet camera. Every detail could be important. But in the meantime, he had to devote himself to Hetcher.

"All right. But what could be more astonishing: the existence of an impossible being or that there are many of its kind? Think about it, we haven't found any life forms on Mars, not even microbial life. And then, suddenly, a being such as tweel appears? Where did it come from? What did it feed on? It reminds me a bit too much of Ray Bradbury, you know? That's what I told you about, wasn't it? *The Martian Chronicles,* do you remember?"

Hetcher trudged on so that the red dust clouded around his legs. "I don't know this well enough, but maybe Tweel is based on crystalline structures or something that we haven't yet recognized as life? I mean, that could be, right?"

"If I've learned anything, it's that we can never be sure," Aescunnar admitted. "But even if, and I emphasize *if*, Tweel was an autochthonous life form, where are the others of his kind? If he does exist... I suppose you think so?"

"He could be a shipwrecked astronaut. Or the last of his kind. Or the others are hiding as boulders somewhere here," Hetcher pointed out. He walked a little faster now, as if they were approaching their destination.

"Okay, so if that Tweel really existed..."

Hetcher turned around briefly, his gaze intense as seldom before. "He existed. He lived outside our imagination. And now he's gone." Then he turned forward again and turned into a corridor that had hardly been recognizable behind a protruding rock.

Gone? Not dead?

Aescunnar was confused in more ways than one. "Uh...Hetcher... "

"Yes?"

He thought for a moment and decided not to have a discussion. Instead, he said, “You move down here as safely as if this area were your home, but you’ve never been here, have you?”

Hetcher stopped. He took a deep breath. “That’s right. You want an explanation? Well, I don’t just see my surroundings, I hear them.”

“Just as you heard Tweel’s call?”

The Ferron stiffened. “How do you...”

“How do I know that?” Aescunnar laughed. “Historians are used to deriving big connections from small pieces of the puzzle. I’m only putting two and two together. Do you remember when you took off with the Mars mobile? When you realized that I was following you, you wanted to convince me to turn back. ‘You’re deaf like everyone else, Cyr!’ you told me. ‘You don’t hear the world as it is!’“

“Yes,” Hetcher said simply. “You’ve put that together well. I was called.”

Aescunnar noticed. Again, a single word somehow didn’t fit the statement or what he was expecting. “You were called? By whom? Tweel? Or someone else?”

“That’s...I can’t explain it. Not in your language. There are no words for it. None that I know.”

The black-haired man clenched his hands. “Don’t hold back. Try! We have nothing to lose.”

“All right—” Hetcher interrupted himself, his eyes widened, his head twitched. “Watch out, Cyr!”

While he was still shouting his warning, he lunged at the historian. The force of his heavy body was so great that the two men were carried several meters. Sand obscured their view.

“What—”

Aescunnar’s words were swallowed up by thunder. Where they

had just been standing, rocks had fallen, pouring down, swallowed up by a dense cloud of red dust. Fragments tumbled down the path, directly towards the two of them. A head-sized chunk rolled across the floor, right against Hetcher's foot.

Aescunnar blinked. Were his senses playing tricks on him? Was the Martian dust fooling him and distorting his vision? He would have bet that the stone would hit Hetcher, but it continued to roll as if nothing had happened. He looked at the Ferron, who didn't even seem to notice the rock.

The historian felt himself getting cold. If he had still been standing over there...

"How did you notice the rockfall?"

Hetcher stood up as if nothing had happened. "How do you think? With my fine hearing, of course. Come, we must go on!"

Aescunnar just stared at him. What was going on here? Was this...really Hetcher?

He shivered.

"Come, I'll help you up." Hetcher grabbed him by the hand and pulled him up with a jerk that nearly dislocated Aescunnar's shoulder...

10.

On board Ke-Matlon

+ + + Dossiers of the *Tosoma*: Passengers + + +

+ + + Dossier TO-P 163 — Shan-Ti, Anne + + +

Born: 19/5/2001, height 1.69 meters, 48 kilograms, hair color: black, eye color: black

Professional career: Studied in Beijing, specializing in electrical engineering, senior engineer at JemDrah Inc., Hong Kong, since 2030, development of several new multifibers.

Prognosis: Passenger A.S. is one of the talented scientists in the field of research who are particularly suitable for the analysis of extraterrestrial technology. It makes sense to include her in a team with others.

+ + + Dossier TO-P 543 — Moncreiffe, Tatum + + +

Born: 4/2/1984, height 1.89 meters, 75 kilograms, hair color: gray, eye color: green

Professional career: Studied theology in Dublin; pastor in Belgium, Iceland, and Germany; Bishop; Prelate

Prognosis: Passenger T.M. will act as a representative of the Christian churches. Close cooperation and presentation training with members of friendly faiths is recommended.

+ + + Dossier TO-P577 — Razafimanantsoa + + +

Born: 7/11/1997, height 1.78 meters, 125 kilograms, hair color: black, eyes: brown

Professional career: unknown. The prefix “Ra-” marks an honorary title acquired through achievements, but is also considered part of the name in Madagascar; since 2034 media presence as a mediator between religions.

Prognosis: Passenger R. acts as a representative of nature- and ancestor-based religious beliefs. His biography shows that he has a talent for entering into dialogue with other people, a talent that will hopefully be useful on Arkon as well.

The gaunt matriarch watched the goings-on of the Naats on the world below her. Gedt-Kemar was traveling through its cold spell that lasted for many years, and there was hardly a Nham who liked to go there during this time. Those who entered Gedt-Kemar almost always did so as exiles.

But despite first appearances, the ice world was by no means an empty wasteland. The matriarch knew that not all life could be pushed back by the cold. Microorganisms, bacteria, and crabs thrived in the ice, algae dyed some layers coffee-brown and, together with bacteria, flatworms and fungi inside the meter-thick layers, formed the basis of life for completely different creatures that cavorted on this barren white world. Almost all of them had some form of frost protection. Some released proteins into their immediate environment and thus ensured their liquid state; others contained high concentrations of organic molecules that acted as freezing inhibitors and thus protected against the extreme cold.

“Matriarch ...”

Etztak had entered unnoticed and bowed deeply. The old man always walked slightly bent over anyway. Now his red-bearded chin almost touched the ground. He spread both arms to the sides and turned his palms upwards. He bent one knee and remained in this position.

Belinkhar looked at the massive Nham, who now served as a shadow for the second matriarch. What had Gyrikh seen in him?

“Get up!”

He defied the order. Well, maybe he was scared after all. “Matriarch, I...”

“You should be aware that your words condemn you as much as your actions. You, of all people, should refrain from action. You’re just the shadow.” She sharply separated each word from the other so that he understood how serious she was.

Gyrikh had had an affair with Etztak, if “affair” was the right word for it, because whatever existed between them had been frighteningly open and lasting. A matriarch and her shadow? It was “unseemly,” as a Swoon might have called it. No one would have been surprised with the irrepressible Belinkhar, but with well-adjusted Gyrikh? With her, of all people?

Even Belinkhar hadn’t thought it possible when she had heard about it. This man...every gesture, every word, every fiber betrayed his reluctance to serve her, but he never said a frank word about it. When he looked at her, he always seemed to think, *You should be dead and Gyrikh should live instead. The false sister has died, the false sister rules over the Nham, the false sister I must serve, bound by blood and oaths.*

Did he think she couldn’t see it? Did he think he was the only one who missed Gyrikh? One in three Nham did, at least. And she herself more than anyone else. Yes, no matter how different she and her sister may have been, they were united by blood, tradition, responsibility. Not even death severed that bond.

Oh, sister...

Etztak sighed heavily, hoisting his broad body back onto both legs. He kept his head down. When Belinkhar still didn’t speak, he couldn’t stand it any longer. “Matriarch, I...I only did what was in the vital interest of the clan. Defying the Empire is suicidal. We had no other choice...”

She raised her hand. “I didn’t criticize you. What is the status of the ship?”

He paused. *Very good. Surprise him.*

“The…status…yes.” He pulled a holopyramid out of his jacket pocket. It was strange that he always wore the same things. Always simple-cut, loose jackets and trousers, always straight seams, no embellishments, no fashionable frills. Always dark, almost black. He apparently took his function very seriously. No matter what she might think of him and what he might think of her, they both had the same goal: the preservation and prosperity of *Ke-Matlon*, the Web in orbit around Gedt-Kemar. “I have here the reports of the individual stations.”

Belinkhar tapped on the back of her command chair. “Come here, right by my side; we’ll look through it together.”

He stopped again, hesitated for a moment, then came to her.

Yes, just act like an obedient Lamanog. Come here, fetch, sit, turn. Brave Lamanog. Brave Etztak.

“First, the big picture!” she demanded.

Etztak nodded. It was that very special, barely perceptible nod that betrayed his agreement; if, on the other hand, he had nodded more emphatically, it would mean he found the decision at hand delicate, and depending on the jerkiness of his movement, it could spell the extent of the contradiction that would inevitably come.

Belinkhar wasn’t sure to what extent Etztak was consciously cultivating this and thereby trying to influence her subliminally; she hoped he might not be so cunning because in that case she would have to play the old game *“If he’s thinking what I think he’s thinking…”* But she had never shown any talent for such intricate strategic maneuvers as in the *Garrabo,* an old Arkonide board game. *Boring,* she had always told Gyrikh and swept the pieces off the board when she had noticed that once again such a trap prepared long in advance had snapped shut and took an important piece from her.

“*Ke-Matlon* has not been affected in its internal design or in its geostationary position,” she stated after scrolling through several lists and scans. The autodiagnostics of the central positronics had been carried out only an hour ago, and there had been no

substantial errors in the transmission of information. Only communication with Observatory 29, Hangar Lock 102 and Camp 26 was down. Secondary. So *Ke-Matlon* was fully operational.

“Damage to closed contracts,” she demanded.

Etztak nodded resolutely.

“Or do you have another suggestion?”

He hesitated, unsure if she was setting a trap for him by seducing him into speaking his mind. But the shadow in him gained the upper hand. “We should deal with the psychological and social situation on board. After an incident like...” He fell silent for a moment under the staring gaze of his superiors. “An analysis of this data only makes sense if we know the causes and are able to assess the extent to which we have to intervene artificially in order to change the situation according to our wishes.”

“You’re right.”

“So?”

Etztak called up a list of all signed, but not yet finalized, contracts that were currently valid for *Ke-Matlon*. It wasn’t particularly long, but it never was.

There were other Mehandor clans in more densely developed areas of the Empire who would have laughed even at ten times the volume of sales. But that didn’t matter; *Ke-Matlon* had a virtual monopoly as the only independent stage station for transition spacecraft in this sector. Nowhere else was there a neutral place that served as a supply and hub, shipyard and transshipment point for goods at the same time. The fees were a clever mix of shameless overpricing and unrivaled low prices.

Belinkhar’s father had already insisted that customers had to be satisfied overall: one might complain about the long journey, the other about the high prices, the third about the strict regulations, and the fourth about the additional services, but if each of the four was satisfied with everything else, they would come again.

You can't please everyone, had been the essence of her father's teachings. *So at least do it right for yourself.*

Perhaps that had been the reason she had realized herself so wildly and independently as a cheater before Gyrikh's death had forced her into the corset of *Ke-Matlon*. Even a cheater knew the importance of the blood ties that bound her to family and clan.

Etztak pondered the numbers. Finally, he nodded again. "If we slow down the extinguishing work on the *Julab* by three percent, we will gain ten percent effectiveness for the conversions of the Araic Medoyacht. Both projects can be realized with a reduced buffer."

"How high is this buffer?"

Etztak bowed his head as if he wanted to sniff the data pyramid. "Two percent."

He knew very well that this was not enough. Normally, they maintained a time fluctuation tolerance of ten percent for each offer. This was enough to finish on time in almost all cases. If she rebuked him for the dramatic reduction and rejected it, that would have been fine on any other day. But this time they needed a sign of their cooperation. If she agreed, it would show him that she was willing to continue to trust him. However, he could also interpret it as a sign of weakness. *Oh sister...*

"Exceptionally," she decided. "Exceptional times call for exceptional solutions."

He nodded. Was there an expression of understanding in his angular, unpleasant face? In this traitor's grimace?

No. I don't think so.

"Good. Next point: detailed analysis."

Shan-Ti was unable to avert her gaze. So this was what death looked like: a red-hot piece of sharp metal...

Strangely, neither her Chinese father nor her American mother

had ever spoken of such a thing. Death in space had not been foreseen in either of their two different cultures—not in the easy ways of a simple family, a simple world in which one lived to work and worked to die. Simple rules that she had wanted to break.

"Quick!" She forced herself to look at life and not death. She was still alive, and this feeling would exhaust her until the very last moment. Death had no power over her.

Three things happened: She grabbed Moncreiffe's hand and pulled the prelate towards her. Schallempak pointed with the encoder to the section behind them. And the piece of debris pierced the tunnel, first the ceiling, then the floor, cutting the protective shell like a sharp blade through thin paper.

Three things, all at the same time or so close to each other that it seemed like a single moment to a human being.

Shan-Ti screamed when she realized what was happening. Nothing had been able to prepare her for such a thing; none of the lectures, none of the exercises on board the *Tosoma*. It was something else entirely to see the black, cold universe that was actually everything here in the middle of nowhere, and to feel it.

The power of the universe literally robbed her of everything. It tore the breath from her lips, sucked it out of her lungs, and thrust an unearthly coldness through every pore, every orifice, into her heart. And something tore at her body with terrible violence...

Such is death...

Her mouth opened and closed like a koi thrown out of the protective water. She gasped for air, but it eluded her. She opened her hands to fend off what was attacking her, and the terrible force of the air pulled Prelate Moncreiffe away, towards the crack in the tunnel behind which the endless cold night awaited. The elderly woman stretched out her arms in despair and got hold of Shan-Ti's leg.

She's going to pull me away!

The Swoon screamed and whirled past her. She reacted instinctively and reached for the little creature. She no longer had any feeling in her hands, they were so cold, and she hoped that her grip would be firm enough to hold and at the same time not so tight that she would bruise Schallempak. She saw the floating disk of the cucumber-like creature whirl away to the stars so infinitely far away that she would never reach them.

A blow hit her in the back: Razafimanantsoa!

She finally lost her footing. All of them were now swept backwards towards space by the air suction. And then, suddenly, they fell to the ground when the undertow abruptly ended. The dull little pain of the impact seemed like a blessing to her.

"So cold," whispered Schallempak. "S-s-s-s-o c-c-c-c-c-o-l-d..."

Shan-Ti picked up the barely conscious creature and held him to her chest, even though she felt as if she had just stepped out of a freezer. Her whole face burned with cold, her fingers were purple and stiff.

But we are alive. Schallempak must have turned the energy screen back on just in time, she thought.

Prelate Moncreiffe puffed beside her and sat up. "What was that?"

"The hand of our ancestors. Or God's, whichever you prefer." Razafimanantsoa pulled himself together. "Something wanted to kill us. Something or someone who doesn't have the big picture in mind, probably." He dragged the prelate up.

"It was an accident," Shan-Ti said. "Nothing more than an accident."

Moncreiffe looked over at Razafimanantsoa. "What kind of accident are we talking about? Technical failure?"

Shan-Ti laughed softly as she looked for a comfortable carrying position for the Swoon. The other two had not understood what had

actually happened or the danger they had been in. “A large, sharp piece of metal hit the tunnel and slashed it.”

Razafimanantsoa looked around suspiciously. “A sharp piece of metal? You’d think the Mehandor would have a grip on the space debris problem.”

Shan-Ti pointed outside. “It looked more like a piece of rubble.” She closed her eyes and lowered her head. Would the others understand what she feared?

“Where is it?” began Moncreiffe, and then he spoke no further. Understanding was evident on his face.

“The Nham opened fire on the *Tosoma*?” whispered Razafimanantsoa. “What barbarism.”

Shan-Ti shook her head and pointed in the direction they had been walking. “There’s no proof of that. The Mehandor don’t seem to be violent beings at all. That would be idiotic for the trade that seems to be their purpose in life. And I may not be an expert, any more than the two of you, but have you seen any guns of a caliber here that could even scratch the *Tosoma*? Besides, I don’t think the Mehandor would ever seriously want to see such a fragile construction as the Web involved in a fight. So let’s presume innocence. There is no reason to stop here. You wanted to go to the Crest Observatory, didn’t you?”

“Ooh,” Schallempak lamented, straightening up a little. “What was that? Anne, you’ve...”

“Saved you?” said Razafimanantsoa, laughing. “Yes, she really has!”

“...touched me?” the Swoon replied.

Anne stopped. “I’m sorry.”

Schallempak looked her in the face and noticed the grief beyond the black eyes. “No, I’m sorry. It was very...generous of you. It’s just...” He made a gesture that looked like a shrug. “I’m not used to

it."

"I didn't know what else to do."

The Swoon relaxed a little; the fine wrinkles around his eyes deepened. "I owe you a great debt of gratitude and consider it an honor to have been touched by you. Not that I would ask for it more often. But if you could carry me the little distance to the observatory, I would be very much obliged to you. I suppose my levitation disk is...gone?"

"Fine. Now that that's been clarified, shall we move on?" Prelate Moncreiffe waved one hand impatiently.

Razafimanantsoa gave Shan-Ti an amused look. "We don't want to keep the old Arkonide waiting, although I doubt he's waiting for us."

In fact, it didn't take long. Only about four hundred meters were left, without a noticeable incline or unpleasant descent, and without another collision. Shan-Ti glanced back and peered outside several times, but there was no sign of a space battle or other pieces of debris.

When she reached the door to the observatory, it turned out to be a "medium security door," as Schallempak called it. The actual door was shaped like an iris diaphragm and was made of intensified Mehandrone, a special alloy made only by Mehandor that combined elasticity and strength. On both sides of this door, which could only be opened by an individual imprint of the station staff, there were very thin, luminous bulkheads made of a fiberglass-like composite, which were simply decorative. Towards the corridor, the entrance was mandarin-colored, shining into the turquoise interior.

Schallempak opened the first bulkhead and the iris diaphragm, then raised an arm in warning. "I can only buy you a limited amount of time. Because of your people, unpleasant situations occur throughout the station, and it is only a matter of time before the matriarch has to take massive action if she does not want to endanger the whole station. I'll help you and speak for you, okay?"

Shan-Ti nodded and the others followed suit. When the Swoon looked at them, confused, she confirmed on their behalf that they agreed.

"All right," said Schallempak, and opened the interior door to the observatory. "I welcome my esteemed guests to my humble place of work..."

The observatory was not particularly large, but size was a thoughtless waste on board *Ke-Matlon*, so one should not be surprised. As is so often the case, it depended on the use of the available space and the technology within it.

On the black, reflective floor, several diffusely glowing cubes of different sizes stood together in groups. With the exception of the two access bulkheads, the three interior walls of the room, which was only about six by four meters in size, were covered with monitors, input options, holoprojection zones, control desks, and analysis equipment. At first glance, they looked like a strange, miniaturized cityscape, Shan-Ti thought. It would certainly be worthwhile to watch Schallempak at work in this oversized cockpit.

The outer wall was divided horizontally into three areas of about equal size, one above the other, the middle of which was transparent and offered an unobstructed view of space and a sliver of the planet that rotated cold and white beneath them, taking the station with it. In the lower area was upholstered seating and several fold-out sensor brackets with a number of control panels. The upper third was occupied by an image projection film on which detailed images of the Beta Albireo system could be displayed.

Shan-Ti immediately understood why Bull had christened the planet Snowman: the mountains and snowdrifts seemed to conjure up a chain of snowmen on the surface. At least, with a little imagination, it looked that way, and the half-Chinese woman had plenty of it; she was considered one of the most renowned artists on Earth. Her paintings were made in the old-fashioned way with oil and acrylic paints, but she created such vivid and photorealistic effects that her portraits achieved staggering sales revenues.

On one of the upholstered seats sat an old Arkonide in a simple, beige robe. He had put a hand under his chin and was looking into space, seemingly lost in thought.

“Derengar,” Schallempak said to him, but was immediately interrupted by Moncreiffe.

She hurried past Shan-Ti, one hand outstretched. “Master Crest! You have no idea how happy...”

The old Arkonide turned around.

It wasn’t Crest.

Moncreiffe froze, her face showing confusion.

“Excuse me,” said the Arkonide slowly. “My name is Lafcon da Nichannga. Do we know each other? Since you addressed me by a different name, I suspect a mistake.”

He didn’t wait for the answer, but stared back out into space again.

“Come, sit down with me. Isn’t this vastness absolutely wonderful and astonishing?” He waved to the newcomers, lost in thought. “Look into the nothingness and you will find that it clears your thoughts.”

Shan-Ti hesitated and saw that the other two felt the same way.

“This is not the one you were looking for?” asked Schallempak quietly.

“I’m afraid not,” Shan-Ti admitted.

The swoon spun back and forth. His desperation was palpable. “An old Arkonide Derengar—are there so many of them on this insignificant station?”

“Obviously, at least two,” replied Moncreiffe, who was now gradually dropping her hand again.

Schallempak narrowed his eyes. “Hmmm...” He consulted his multifunction device. “Yes. As far as I can see from the credentials, he’s the only old male Arkonide.”

“That’s impossible,” Moncreiffe instructed him.

“Nothing is impossible,” said Razafimanantsoa and old Lafcon in unison.

Shan-Ti was silent. She watched with interest as the Malagasy and the Arkonide looked at each other: the somewhat full-bodied, milk-chocolate-brown man with the slightly prominent lips, the luxuriantly growing, black hair, and the obsidian eyes, and the lean, chalky-white Arkonide, the thin lips pressed together, with silky, shimmering, thin, colorless hair and those eerie orange-red eyes.

Two worlds actually meet here, Shan-Ti thought as she sketched the right picture in her mind. Colors joined together to create forms, joined together to form concepts...

“My name is Razafimanantsoa, and I come from Earth. I deal with spirituality, Derengar Lafcon. Like you, I suppose?” The Malagasy smiled kindly and took a seat next to the old man.

“Really? Earth?” The Arkonide closed his eyes as if he had to think. “What an unusual name. So...obvious. You haven’t been in space travel long?”

His eyelids opened and the burning gaze became so curious for a moment that it began to become uncomfortable.

“Long enough,” replied Razafimanantsoa, still smiling. That smile melted away the suspicion in the old man’s gaze, who was now looking at Moncreiffe and Shan-Ti. “And what planets do you both come from?”

“We also come from Earth. My name is Tatum Moncreiffe, and this,” the Prelate waved in Shan-Ti’s direction, “is Anne Shan-Ti.”

“Wonderful and astonishing,” said Lafcon da Nichannga. “A wealth of variety, like on a primitive world with different spheres of influence. Do you see yourselves as a common culture at all? I

suppose you are only on the way to a cosmic understanding?"

Moncreiffe scowled at him. "Don't be so quick to judge us!"

Lafcon closed his eyes again briefly. "Oh, but I don't. I...watch. Analyze. You are really extremely wonderful and fascinating. So...direct. Sit down, please. I get tired so easily." He looked at Shan-Ti, confused. "Do we know each other?"

Schallempak plucked at her earlobe. "A ship left him here. He was supposed to be taken to Aralon, but resisted. He is said to have been a very clever man before he was touched by shrinkage. Maybe too much or too little starlight."

Shan-Ti nodded. She felt helpless and betrayed, and at the same time she felt infinitely sorry for the old man.

Belinkhar and Etztak went through all the data. Although *Ke-Matlon* had remained functional, there was a lot to do: Several pieces of debris had hit the Web but had not caused any major damage due to rapidly activated impact fields. Still, something had to be done. A food depot had been destroyed, but this was easily compensated.

And it went on: Could the physiological needs of all beings on *Ke-Matlon* continue to be satisfied? Were there any doubts about security or gaps in social coordination, the connection of the foreigners to the Mehandor, and the exchange with the Nham? Which offers had to be made more frequently, which less frequently, which at other locations? The invisible hand of the market did not work in such a special environment and needed support; all Mehandor knew that.

Etztak rummaged through the data like a bull through the steppe soil of Nhamgar.

"Do we have enough people available to arrest the crew of the *Tosoma* on board and get them ready for the handover?"

Etztak looked up from the list in surprise but immediately

projected a holo that, in the form of an elevation of the station, highlighted all the areas in which certain concentrations of people were located. At the touch of a button, lists of names, security status, and other data appeared, but they were of decreasing interest.

"We should set up a gathering point," Etztak suggested.

She put a hand on his right forearm in a strangely misplaced confidential movement for her. "Do so."

He trembled but nodded weakly.

You don't understand what's going on, do you? You can't make sense of me any longer? Good. Get used to it. You will never dare to betray me again because you must always fear that this is exactly what I wanted and that I only used you as an instrument.

"I know it's hard for you, Matriarch. But believe me: you made the only right decision. I will immediately issue the appropriate orders."

"Is the list complete?" she asked abruptly. "It seems to me that there are too few names. That's not two hundred, is it? And I didn't see the old man or his young companion among them; they should have caught my eye."

"The woman whom you have now identified as Thora, as I gather from the files, was, as far as I remember, back on board the *Tosoma*," said Etztak, entering some search orders. "No, she's not here anymore. But the old Derengar's transfer to the *Tosoma* wasn't recorded. His last known whereabouts...wait, that's strange. He must be on board, but I can't find him."

"Get in touch with the three areas that have fallen out of our communication network as a result of the debris. Maybe he's in one of those places."

"I'll take care of it right away. What should I do about the dead? Would you like to be present at the funeral service yourself?"

She listened in alarm. "Dead? I assumed that no one was

seriously injured by the damage."

"Well, that's just the social situation, Matriarch. You remember abolishing the peace obligation and handing out weapons to our people?"

Of course, I remember. So, you want to play games again, do you?

"Excuse me, Matriarch. Of course you remember," he reeled out, as if he had read her mind. As if they didn't have enough star-infested talents on board thanks to the *Tosoma*. "It's just that in the 'Garden of Nham,' young Haklui Farey lost her nerve when some *Tosoma* people tried to escape your grasp by hiding in the crowd. Security is still figuring out how the settings on the *Diust V-7* long-handled handgun could change from paralysis to beam fire. In any case, she fired into the crowd to stun everyone and then get the suspects out. Before she realized what she was doing and took her finger off the trigger, seven people were dead."

He raised his head and looked at her as if to say, *You are to blame for her death. You accepted the* Tosoma *as a customer and are jointly responsible for the breach of the peace.*

"Members of the clan?" she asked. Her voice croaked slightly.

"Three: Gaztal, Orimul, and Vlo. The remaining four were non-Mehandor. Identification is still ongoing; their burns are very severe. Probably two female humans from the *Tosoma*, a harassed soprano, and a wandering plant."

"Are there any other dead or seriously injured that you haven't mentioned yet?"

Etztak shook his head. "No, Matriarch. That was all."

"Good. Put together a condolence holo. For Vlo, please leave room for something more personal. He was my father's Jhoka, after all. I'll take care of it as soon as the situation with the Arkonide squadron is resolved."

"Good." Etztak looked again at the data on his holopyramid. "Let's move on to the next points..."

11.

On Mars

+ + + Dossiers of the Bradbury Base: Personnel + + +

+ + + BR-BA-P 23 — Aescunnar, Cyr + + +

Born (unconfirmed) 6/11/1989, height: 1.81 meters, weight: 72 kilograms, hair color: black (half-bald), eye color: brown (Enter a level gamma security password for more information!)

Special language skills: C2 level in English, French, Russian, German, Armenian, Mandarin, Aramaic, Egyptian, Ancient Greek, Ferron

Studies: Prehistory, Early History, and Sociology at various universities (without degree); training in pre-astronautics

Professional career: Archaeologist, historian for various companies and institutions (among others), partly freelance

Notes: special recommendation by Homer G. Adams and Crest da Zoltral

Prognosis: C.A. has only recently started working on the Mars project; his curiosity recommends him for further tasks of exploration. Inclusion in tasks that require classification in hierarchies cannot be advised.

"Slowly!" cried Aescunnar as Hetcher pulled him up with a force he would not have thought the Ferron had.

That's not Hetcher! a small, angry voice whispered to him. *Get that through your head or it's too late.*

"Oh, excuse me!" Hetcher looked embarrassed. "This low gravity...did I hurt you?"

Aescunnar massaged his aching shoulder and took a step back. “No, it’s all right. But...”

“Yes?” Hetcher looked at him curiously. “What do you want to know?”

“Where do I start?” he joked but immediately became serious as he took a closer look at Hetcher. There was something about the Ferron that he didn’t like. Many things. There was his unexpected appearance, the claim to have eliminated Tweel, the ability to speak, the far-too-casual tone, the great power, the stone...

You see the clues, but you refuse to recognize the picture...

Aescunnar took a deep breath.

“We should move on,” urged Hetcher. “This way! We’ll be there soon.” He pointed to a corridor.

Aescunnar stopped. “Wait a minute!”

We’ll see if you’re really Hetcher.

“What is it?”

“Why are you always so sure? I don’t remember much of my escape through these corridors, but I remember running downhill. You claim to be bringing us back, but it keeps going downhill, even though it should be uphill. Or is Mars like a drawing by Escher?”

“Escher?” Hetcher winked nervously.

“I’ll show you,” said Aescunnar, bending down for a small piece of rock. “Do you see that? Good.”

And with these words he threw the stone at Hetcher, who had no time left to dodge.

The stone flew right through Hetcher, but not in the way Aescunnar had expected. Just before the stone hit, a hole melted in the body of the Ferron closed again immediately after. All this happened at lightning speed, so that a casual observer probably

wouldn’t even have noticed.

Aescunnar understood immediately. “Tweel…” he whispered. Fear gripped him

Tweel was here the whole time! But I didn’t recognize him!

“Cyr! It’s not what you think!” cried the strange creature who looked like Hetcher and was about to rush towards him.

But Aescunnar was no longer listening. That wasn’t Hetcher; it never had been. He turned around and ran away.

“Cyr! Wait! No! Don’t do that!”

But it was only one voice.

Any voice.

No more.

Not anymore.

12.

On Snowman

+ + + Dossiers of the *Tosoma*: Foreign Worlds + + +

+ + + TO-F 02 — Snowman (“Gedt-Kemar”) + + +

Named by Reginald Bull; second planet of the Beta Albireo system (q.v.). Due to its eccentric trajectory, Snowman alternately goes through periods of heat and cold. A warm period lasts 23 years. During this time, Snowman is a water world. During the eighty-year cold period, the planet is shrouded in an ice sheet.

Diameter: 12,000 kilometers

Day length: 31 Earth hours

Gravity: 0.8 Gravos

+ + + Access to further information is not possible; information network *Ke-Matlon* blocked. Recommendation: Exploration of the planet by remote-controlled probes + + +

Snow began to fall.

Snowman was a breathtakingly beautiful world in its purity, but it was not pleasant: the planet consisted almost only of ice.

“We’re walking across a frozen ocean,” Rhodan surmised, as they had melted a large enough cave into a frozen crest of waves. “And what for? So that they can catch us?”

“The Naats have long since left. They’ve probably checked us off as done,” Gucky said. Right, Thora?”

“Yes, I suppose so. There’s just one thing I don’t understand...”

Rhodan and Gucky looked at her expectantly.

“Why did Reginald Bull do that? If there is one person who is not susceptible to misunderstood exploits, it’s him!”

“You underestimate the power of friendship. Reginald sacrificed himself for his friends. For Gucky. For me. And for you too.”

“One life for three? I thought you didn’t agree with that kind of sacrifice? At any rate, on *Ke-Matlon* you refused to give the Mehandor their wages.”

He looked at her and yet into the void. “It was a mistake.”

“It was.”

“No!” said Gucky indignantly. “That was understandable! But you have to learn that you can’t always save everyone, Perry! Sometimes you have to make a decision.”

He sounded harsher than Rhodan had ever heard him speak. There was probably more steel hidden beneath all the soft fur than one might think when one looked at the cute creature.

It crackled outside.

“What’s that?” Thora asked, alarmed.

He listened to the icy desert, which was only howling softly. The snow was falling thickly. But the sound was not repeated, nor did the sensors show a heat source. There were no other clues that would indicate pursuers.

Gucky walked a few steps in their cramped accommodations. “There’s something you both need to know before we start discussing things: Reg was hurt.”

The fall! Rhodan thought. *I should have known!*

“Why didn’t he say anything?” Thora asked. “We have the medical care facilities of the suits. I could have used it as I did with you...” In a helpless gesture, she spread her arms. “That foolish

man."

It sounded like a curse.

Gucky looked at Rhodan as if he already knew his question. When it came, he threw his head to the side as if he had received a slap in the face.

Rhodan barely recognized his own voice. It was a perfect fit for Snowman. "Why didn't you say anything if you knew?"

Did you sacrifice him? We only know what you let us know. I've considered you a friend from the beginning, but how do you see us? His thoughts raged. Rhodan felt a fury within him that was as powerful and boundless as he would never have believed. Not with himself.

"Because I didn't know it at first! My powers have limits. I can't teleport and read the minds of everyone around me at the same time!" Gucky almost screamed, then sobbed softly. "Do you think I would have let our Reg go if I had known that? This stupid man went to such lengths not to think about his wound that I didn't notice...until he was already in the race with the combat robots. And I was too weak."

Thora crouched down and put both arms around the mousebeaver. "We were all too weak. Right from the start. Too weak to travel to Arkon. Too weak to mess with the Mehandor. It's my fault. I should never have endorsed this undertaking. You gave everything you could."

Gucky sniffed. "But it wasn't enough."

"It wasn't enough; that's something else entirely. And now you should sleep a little. Right, Rhodan?" She glared at him when he hesitated.

Finally, he nodded. "Yes, sleep a little. You need to regain your strength."

When Gucky had curled up along the back wall of the cave, Rhodan sat down next to him. "I know you did everything you could to save Reg. But it all happened too fast. Sometimes we have

to make split-second decisions, and no one can guarantee that we're doing the right thing."

Gucky raised his head tiredly. "I know, Perry. My friend."

Shortly afterwards, he fell asleep, and Rhodan could only guess from the movements of the sleeping alien what dreams haunted the Ilt.

"You should sleep too," Thora recommended after Rhodan had sat in silence next to Gucky for over an hour. "Our suits protect us from the weather, and I can take care of all other possibilities. I took a few measurements, but they didn't record any energy signatures nearby. We are safe here, at least for the time being."

Outside, the snow was still falling. They were large, white, soft flakes that merged together to form a white wall. They had closed the entrance for a while with their protective force fields, and now a snowdrift more than two meters high hid the cavity and kept the wind out. It didn't worry Rhodan. Should they be snowed in, their technical capabilities would help them to make their way back out. As long as the energy reserves were sufficient...

Rhodan stood up cautiously so as not to wake Gucky. He motioned for Thora to open the helmet of her suit and step aside where it was more protected thanks to the snowdrift. The cold immediately clawed into his skin, but it wasn't nearly as strong as it was outdoors. "That's good."

She imitated him and grimaced. "At the very least, the air tastes different from the mixture that the suits provide us with. What now? Please lie down; you look terrible."

"Thank you! That's exactly how I feel. I don't think I could get enough sleep for a single second. I failed across the board. How many deaths have there been on *Ke-Matlon*, how many on the *Tosoma* as a result of my decisions?"

"But Rhodan—" she began.

He interrupted her. “And the worst of it: Reg is dead! I should have paid more attention to my immediate surroundings; then I would have noticed that he was speaking so little. I would certainly have noticed what was wrong with him. He was probably even clutching his wound and I didn’t see it! And then we ran away without recovering his remains from the ice! What kind of person does that make me?”

She looked at him seriously at first, then smiled, and her face suddenly lost all the harshness and aloofness of the military-trained Akronide who seemed to be above human doubts and contradictions. “You are a good, responsible person, you must not doubt that because of things for which you are not responsible. You can’t save the whole universe—no one can. And you can’t know everything that’s going on inside others. We don’t know for sure if Reginald Bull is really dead. We didn’t see him die. Gucky was at the end of his nerves, and that’s probably why he lost Bull’s train of thought.”

He felt too weak to accept these welcome excuses. “No,” he said simply. “Don’t patronize me!”

She took off a glove and gently put her hand to his cheek. He shuddered.

“Look at me, Perry Rhodan: I am Thora da Zoltral, and I swear to you that I will never lie to you. I feel that Reg is not dead. He is, as they say, ‘impossible to kill.’ Trust me: we’ll see him again.”

After these words, she let her hand slide gently down her cheek and put the glove back on.

He swallowed hard and raised an arm as if to reach for her, but he didn’t. His cheek burned where she had touched him.

“Thora, I...”

Now she interrupted him. Her voice sounded cold and fiery at the same time, which still confused him. “And as far as the *Tosoma* is concerned, every single member of the crew volunteered and knew the risks. I am also responsible for our failed escape. So, if it

has to weigh on anyone's conscience; it should be mine."

"And?"

Thora crossed her arms in front of her chest. "No, it doesn't weigh on my conscience, but not because I don't have a conscience. My decision was appropriate to the situation. That's what counts. The instructors at the space academy drummed that into us again and again. 'The stars don't care about you. They will kill one part of you, cripple another part, break another.'"

"Pounder used to say something similar to me. And yet we both became astronauts."

"Was there a serious alternative when you've heard the call of the stars?" She turned to the opening between the ice wave and the snowdrift and peered through it. "I listen to him every day, and if you want to say that you are different, I'll call you a liar. Of course I became a space traveler. Life is risk. Or should I have stayed at home and lost myself in fictional games? Believe... Wait!" She beckoned him over. "I saw something."

Rhodan tried to make out anything he could in the snow. "Out there? Then your eyes are much better than mine."

"Nonsense! Let's look at our instruments."

They aimed them into the snow-white unreality beyond their small protected area. No traces of robotic or Arkonide pursuers.

"There's something out there," Thora insisted from her observation. "An animal, perhaps?"

But what kind of animal was this supposed to be, looking for food out there in a frostbitten world? Their cave measured minus thirty degrees Celsius; outside it was currently minus sixty degrees.

They listened.

Nothing.

The pair sat opposite each other while Gucky slept.

“What you said earlier…that your life would be forfeited as soon as the Regent learned of you…don’t you think it’s time to give us some more information about Arkon?”

She didn’t bat an eyelash. “You know everything you need to know.”

“But I’d like to know more. For example, who is the Regent, and how many worlds and troops does he command? How do you get the idea that you and Crest are necessary to ‘save’ Arkon, and from whom? And what about the Naats? Even a fool could see that you hate Novaal, even before he showed hostility to us.”

“What Crest and I are doing shall not be to the detriment of the wild world which you call home. Any further knowledge would be useless at the moment. Believe me, Crest will explain everything to you when the time comes.”

“You still treat me like an ignorant barbarian,” he reproached her.

“Prove to me that you’re not,” she replied snippily, but immediately became serious again. “No, you’re not as bad as I thought at first. So fine: I am Crest’s foster daughter, and Crest is the last male representative of House Zoltral. I attended the space academy and worked my way up. Does that help you?”

Rhodan thought for a moment. Then he shook his head. “No. Because you are avoiding other information…”

“You’re not helping yourself at the moment either. Let’s discuss how to proceed.”

This time, Rhodan heard the sound. It sounded like a cockroach, but very quiet and far away. He pricked up his ears to see if he could catch it again, but it didn’t repeat itself.

“What’s your plan?”

Thora thought for a moment. “Wait and see.”

Rhodan laughed dryly. “That doesn’t suit you.”

“Nor you. Of course, we won’t wait too long, but at least until Novaal finally disappears. I’m sure he’ll leave soon; after all, he’s got a mission to do like all the Regent’s squadrons. We were just a small, unforeseen disturbance on his way, which he has already eliminated. As soon as his ships have departed—”

“When will that be? We won’t be able to see when that happens. And we certainly don’t want Novaal to be aware of us through our own radio transmissions, do we?”

“The Naat will leave tomorrow at the earliest, the day after tomorrow at the latest, no matter what complications may await him. I don’t assume that the Mehandor want to make trouble with him. They’re just galactic traders.”

“Problem number two: How are you going to reach the Web?”

“The range of our suit radios should be large enough for this.”

She sounded completely convinced of what she was saying.

“All right. And what could we have to offer the Web to help us?”

Thora looked at him as if she doubted his sanity. “Have you forgotten how eager Matriarch Belinkhar was for our help?”

“I doubt it will last.”

Thora was undeterred. “We will have people speaking for us. Crest has remained aboard *Ke-Matlon*. And a few hundred people.”

Gucky raised his head tiredly. “Can’t I close my eyes for a minute without the two of you bickering?”

Rhodan paid no attention to him. “I don’t want to depress you, but the chance that you won’t be extradited to Novaal is the same…”

“Rrrrrriiii!”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the snowdrift explode, and at the same moment a murderous blow struck him. He was thrown aside, straight at Thora, and at first did not understand what was happening.

“Rhodan!” Thora kicked her legs. “What are you doing?”

“Perry!” Gucky’s voice rang out, ending in a gurgle.

Perry Rhodan felt panic. First Bull, now Gucky…should all his friends on this world die? He tried to get up but slipped and fell again.

I won’t let you die, Gucky.

He tossed and turned to catch a glimpse of the Ilt.

Gucky was fighting for his life.

13.

On board KE-MATLON

+ + + Dossiers of the *Tosoma*: External contacts + + +

+ + + TO-FK 2 — Belinkhar + + +

People: Mehandor

Office: Matriarch of the Nham clan

Appearance: 1.70 meters, red hair, wiry

Age: about 100 years

Biographical details: Before she took office after the unexpected death of her older sister, B. was on the road as a so-called cheater with other peoples.

Prognosis: Due to her numerous external contacts, a certain tolerance can be assumed for B.; Suitability as an ally: doubtful. Further investigation is highly recommended.

“It’s time to demand a favor,” Matriarch Belinkhar greeted her interlocutor, who was connected to her on her private channel via holo.

“You’re eating.”

The Gorshaman sounded almost disappointed, and she knew why. She watched him silently as he glided restlessly up and down in his water tank. His semi-transparent, mushroom hat-shaped body glowed greenish, arched, and fluttered gently. The tentacles that sprouted from his underside drew unknown symbols into the liquid in which his people felt at home.

“So, you’re calling seven relays from your station,” U’mu’lo said.

“Password protected. As agreed. How much?”

“One-seventh of your debt. Another seventh, if you get me the data right away.”

Belinkhar knew the water creatures all too well. They were not honest unless they expected an advantage from it. As a young woman, she had visited the remote homeworld of strange beings rather by chance during her career as a cheater. Her Nham had to learn it the hard way when Gyrikh had died and Belinkhar had succeeded her. The struggle of that time would finally bear fruit.

At that time, the Gorshaman had blown their ship out of the hangar claws and opened fire on *Ke-Matlon* in order to escape with the cargo taken on board without paying for it. Or for the repairs. Or to declare the living Exofish, whom the Empire had placed under a special trade law that the Nham could not ignore. But of course, they had not escaped, for Belinkhar had not been so stupid as to trust them. They had destroyed the office of an Arkonide merchant and thus captured not only the Nham but also the Arkonide and the sector commander.

Belinkhar had offered herself as a mediator, charging fees from both sides and negotiating reparations, which had been extremely lucrative. Part of this reparation had been the collusion of U’mu’lo and three other Gorshaman as system innovators in secondary nodes of the Empire. There they now sat on information lines that an outsider could not reach. Since these were essentially peripheral devices and back-up systems that were particularly protected against external access, she had expected rather lax internal security precautions. And that’s exactly what happened.

U’mu’lo trembled slightly. The five-eyed snake’s head on the long neck swayed in the waves. “Agreed.”

The wiry humanoid did not let the Gorshaman out of her sight. “I need information about two individuals of the Arkonide upper class. The names are Crest da Zoltral and Thora da Zoltral.”

“Easy. Two minutes,” U’mu’lo said, drifting out of range of the holorecorders. “Perhaps less.”

Belinkhar waited. A flashing indicator on her terminal told her that Novaal wanted her to speak. Well, she couldn't keep him waiting. With a wave of her hand, she turned her secret conversation dark; U'mu'lo would receive a waiting prompt as soon as he continued to speak.

Then the head of the Naat appeared as a three-dimensional projection.

"Yes, Commander?"

"I await your confirmation of the transfer of the prisoners."

Belinkhar showed an obliging smile. "Oh, but you already have them, don't you? Your contact," she avoided mentioning Etztak's name, but she emphasized the term in such a way that even a Naat would understand what she meant, "took care of it."

"I won't let you put me off!" threatened Novaal.

Her smile remained. "But I'm not trying to do that. As I said, please contact Etztak directly. Is there anything else?"

The Naat switched off without saying goodbye.

She looked at the clock. Three minutes. Surely U'mu'lo was already waiting for her signal of readiness. She pulled up the holoconnection again. But U'mu'lo was nowhere to be seen.

When the holoimage of the Gorshaman materialized again, he seemed angry, as Belinkhar could tell by the color of his eyes.

"You could have warned me. Never call me again; my debt is settled. I was almost exposed."

Belinkhar did not need to feign her astonishment. "Excuse me? From a simple identity search?"

"Simple? The people you claim to have with you don't exist."

She raised her hand. "Wait, we don't have time for games. Of

course they exist."

"Not if the Regent has his way," said the strange creature.

Belinkhar understood. "Are they non-persons? Their identities have been erased? By the Regent?" She whistled softly through her teeth.

"I suppose it was the Regent," U'mu'lo answered. "Or at least someone who is close to him. I'll send you the data. After that, delete all proof of connection to me."

Belinkhar recognized when a Gorshaman was frightened, and U'mu'lo was filled with panic to his last fiber.

A yellow light pulsed at her workstation. Then it lit up permanently. Data upload finished. Belinkhar signaled to her interlocutor, bent one arm, and pushed her hand from right to left at chest height. The deal was complete.

The Gorshaman said nothing more and abruptly ended the conversation.

The files of the Gorshaman were encoded several times. And even after decoding, "blackened" areas remained. Someone had apparently put a lot of effort and expertise into censoring and changing information. She first ran an automatic info filter over all data, which also compared it with the internal station logs in a temporary file.

Interesting.

From the data, she was able to deduce the individual vibrations of the two Arkonides, that unmistakable individual signature of consciousness. When she compared them to the measurement results of the station locks, it was revealed, as expected, that they were completely identical. However, only for Thora da Zoltral.

With Crest da Zoltral, the two corners showed different deflections in several fields, although a general similarity could not be denied. Similar to, for example, a Golick and a Falme, both of

which were birds. But at least the older man hadn't gone back aboard the *Tosoma*, which meant he was still on board the space station. Her station.

She consulted image files. Archival footage of Crest da Zoltral clearly showed the man who was aboard *Ke-Matlon*, only he seemed much older and more decrepit. Perhaps signs of a disease that had been overcome in the meantime?

Belinkhar called up Crest's current biodata. All of them were within the normal range, but for a man at least twenty years younger than Crest was according to the Imperial database.

Someone is trying to smuggle in a fake Crest, but why? Who is behind it and stupid enough to assume that this trick will not be detected? Especially because it was executed in such an unbelievably clumsy way. The differences between the two are obvious.

If she were the enemy, she would try to arouse as little suspicion as possible—that is, send a copy that was as perfect as possible.

She played detailed shots of Crest as the station had taken them on her screen. This was at least as strange: there were no recognizable scars, nothing that would have indicated an invasive cosmetic treatment. None of the rejuvenation procedures known to her were out of the question.

She searched for Crest's biodata and medical records from previous years. According to Imperial records, he was terminally ill and should have died months ago. The old Arkonide had suffered from an immune deficiency that had favored leukemia. A life-threatening, complex disease, but quite treatable. But that's exactly what they obviously knew how to prevent. Astonishingly, there were blackout files, as if someone had prevented Crest from accessing medical help from the Central Military Hospital, Limpas's research facilities, and even Aralon's Medoclinics.

Someone had an interest in Crest dying, but who? And why? Could this be the starting point for the solution? That someone would send a Crest double just to lure them out of their reserve?

She kept looking.

Whoever wanted to get to Crest had taken a brutal approach to data processing on the one hand, and sophisticated on the other. Some changes were clearly recognizable, others more subtle, and only through cross-connections across several mental corners. Belinkhar knew that she was relying on a very thin factual situation in a number of interpretations. While the easily recognizable deletion of Crest was quickly revealed, it took effort to reconstruct the rest of the information: that Crest had been a Derengar—that is, a scholar—and had ruined his noble house, the Zoltrals, by investing in bubble technology and speculative-mythical projects. That his experiments had cost him his fertility and that he had taken in a prostitute and trained her as an officer, formally as an adopted daughter, but in fact as a mistress. As a result of all these scandals, he had been stripped of all honors and chased out of the Empire; his name was put on the list of non-persons.

But already U'mu'lo had found out that this information was fake. His merit was to have tracked down files that apparently could not be matched with the search term. But just as a black hole was first detected by the distortions in perception all around, these files doctored. They were reports from academies, exhibitions, research projects, and much more, which contained strange cuts. They were altered birth registers and academy graduation lists, or press reports that contained unusual dramaturgical breaks. Obviously, someone had put a lot of energy into erasing the memory of Crest and creating fear in everyone who knew something and had something to say.

The head office got in touch. Etztak wished to speak to her. Annoyed, Belinkhar accepted the conversation. "Yes?"

Etztak bowed. "The Honorable Commander Novaal asks you to confirm the surrender of the prisoners yourself. For your and his protection. He begs you—"

"Have you recorded all the people in question?" she interrupted.

"Well...there are some individuals missing, of whom we do not know which left *Ke-Matlon* in, well, let's say, in an unconventional

way."

Belinkhar hesitated. It was time to implement her plan regarding Crest. The old man interested her. With a quick wave of her hand, she called up a statistic. Yes. There he was. An Arkonide of the right age who often stayed in the observatories. She shoved the data onto Etztak's pad. He winked, dumbfounded, then shook his head and nodded.

"Sort that out! I am reluctant to offer Commander Novaal an incomplete shipment."

Etztak nodded quickly and fiercely. He understood. "Excellent. But may I—"

"Conversation ended!" she announced, switching off.

He had even rejoiced at his assignment. Didn't he understand the difference between necessities and whims? So it was only justified if the shadow also had to deal with the Naat and his threatening backdrop. Whoever summoned the Empire had to take care of the consequences themselves. There were things that Etztak also had to learn.

Back to your secrets, old man, she thought, and began organizing the information in a way she thought helpful.

Crest was actually called Crest da Zoltral. He was, in fact, the last legitimate male member of the old noble house of Zoltral and had earned the scientific rank of Derengar. No later birth had been recorded among the Zoltrals. Thora also bore the name da Zoltral, but only by adoption. She was significantly younger than Crest, her origins perfectly hidden; consequently, she was either of very low standing or came from a dangerous connection. Legally, she had the status of a foster daughter, which was by no means unusual in the old, endangered Arkonide noble families: in this way they ensured their genealogical survival and the basis of their not inconsiderable power.

What was unusual, however, was that there actually seemed to be a close emotional bond between the two that went beyond the

normal social level. However, there was no evidence of sexual activity between the two. This was also confirmed by the profiles of the Space Academy that Thora had attended and passed with distinction.

Strange...

There was an observation gap of several years, and after that the approval of a reconnaissance mission with the research vessel *Aetron*. That was just over a year ago. Compared to all the bureaucratic hurdles and pitfalls that were around Crest as a person, it went pretty smoothly.

It's almost as if you want to get rid of him without it being noticed. Or as if they used all their contacts to escape the Empire's grasp.

She searched in vain for the *Aetron's* mission and crew and leaned back.

One thing is clear: the two are dissidents. A mystery surrounds them, for which Arkon would be willing to pay a lot.

She activated a small storage robot from Swoofon's microworks, actually not much more than a miniature positronic for particularly sensitive data intended only for her use, with numerous keywords and other security precautions. Of course, it could also be cracked, but that took time, and the system would use that time to hack the data beyond recognition. What was deposited there could not be safely housed anywhere.

"All right, Crest, or whatever your name is," Belinkhar whispered, clenching her hand into a fist. "Let's unravel your secret. And, who knows, maybe you'll hide it in this pretty locket around your neck? In any case, you weren't wearing it before..."

Belinkhar pondered feverishly. What she had in mind contradicted all the rules of her clan, but in the end it corresponded perfectly to her goals. She wished she could discuss all this better with Etztak, but without the necessary trust, it was not possible. How could he have betrayed her like that? Didn't he know what

this meant, for her, for him, for all of Ke-Matlon?

What had happened could not be changed. She reminded herself of one of her father's rules: *What's gone is gone!* Costs that were in the past were not allowed to influence their decisions in the present and the future. As a child, she hadn't understood this doctrine until he had explained it to her in a simpler way: if she wanted to eat at a Matlon bar and had already paid, would she turn down the offer to eat at a neighboring, equally good Matlon bar and even get money for it? "Of course not!" she had shouted spontaneously, realizing what her father meant.

Now it was like that again. What Etztak or Crest had done did not matter to Belinkhar's decisions. But what did matter was exacting a benefit from Crest. There was more to the man than was suspected of an ancient Arkonide. She was not allowed to hand him over, but she had to do it if she didn't want to openly oppose the Empire. Him and his two companions. All from the *Tosoma*.

Novaal wouldn't believe her if she told him the truth: that Crest had disappeared. Therefore, she had to bring him Crest. But even if she handed him over, Novaal would not accept him because the individual vibrations did not match the stored ones, however the old Arkonide had done it.

The Naat would not understand it and, instead of investigating, would rather take the easier path and accuse the Nham of deception. If she followed the current policy correctly, that would be exactly the pretext to do what he liked. Even expropriation was an option; the Empire was striving outwards again after a long period of stabilization, and every station that was so exposed on the outskirts of the Empire could be used as a valuable naval base provided it belonged to the Empire and was not neutral.

The first casualty in the war was always the truth, so Belinkhar was not allowed to reveal it. There was only one solution: she had to hand over Crest in such a way that Novaal would not become suspicious. She regretted it very much, but it was the best thing she could think of. As soon as Novaal left, she could devote herself to the search for Crest—and fathom his secret when she was sure that no one could stab her in the back.

She leaned back, crossed her arms behind her head, and thought it over. *Am I doing the right thing, little sister?*

— This is how the Nham are: do what is necessary. —

But if it makes me happy at the same time?

— It remains necessary, doesn't it? —

You would never have done it, would you?

— If it were the right thing to do... —

Belinkhar sighed long and deep. Then she reached for a hidden drawer and pulled it open. There was only one item inside: a small AutoInject ampoule. It was a good thing that she had picked it up and not destroyed it when the Haklui forces had found this terrible drug during the routine control of a Jomanian freighter.

Above a holofield, a poison-green, head-sized ball suddenly shone like an evil eye.

"What's that?" Shan-Ti asked the Swoon on her shoulder.

"Hmm?" said Schallempak. When he recognized the signal, he seemed visibly nervous. "A call from the head office. I have to get in touch. Will you take me over there?"

Shan-Ti carefully set him down on the central, permanently installed console. Schallempak's fingers slid over a palm-sized sensor surface, producing a sequence of sounds. A blue-white cone of light enveloped him in order to transmit his image as a holo to the interlocutor. "First creative engineer Schallempak, Neobservatory Two-Nine. How can I assist?"

A human face formed from the green ball. The green seeped away in bluish colors that gave the picture a touch of materiality. Shan-Ti looked closely at the stranger: short red hair, a neatly trimmed beard, a thick face with bags and wrinkles. Eyes that looked so evil that she involuntarily lowered her gaze.

“Schallempak, didn’t you get the matriarch’s message?” the head barked.

The Swoon trembled. “The…message. The matriarch. Yes, of course.”

“And?”

“I am shocked beyond measure by the rudeness of the commander of that spaceship,” Schallempak said.

“I know you,” said the head gravely. “I appreciate you. But I never thought you were a liar. Or…a collaborator. You’re not, are you?”

“How can you even suggest that?” said the Swoon indignantly.

“We’re looking for three strangers,” said the head. “Are there any guests with you?”

Shan-Ti nodded at the Swoon. He shouldn’t lie for them. Everything would clear up; after all, they were civilized beings. *Everything is just a clash of different cultures. Maybe Lafcon is right in what he says. Maybe the stranger recognizes us better than we know ourselves.*

“I asked them to come here myself. They’re quite magical…”

“Spare me your subjective impressions. Please.” The man took a deep breath. “It’s really important. According to our records, we are still missing an old Arkonide and two women, one of whom is called Anne, the other Tatiana. Are these three with you?”

Anne? Could he really mean me? Have the Mehandor heard of my talent? Or are they only concerned with the “Seventh?”

“Ah, I think there’s a mix-up, dear shadow. There is indeed an Arkonide and two women with me, but…”

“I don’t want to hear a but! An old Arkonide Derengar, plus two women, Anne and Tatiana.”

“Tatum,” Schallempak corrected. I’m sure her name is Tatum, not Tatiana.”

Prelate Moncreiffe nodded emphatically, but did not say a word. Apparently, like Shan-Ti, she sensed that it would not be wise to interfere in this conversation. On the other hand, what could be worse?

The Mehandor frowned. “Maybe. They are strangers, and strangers have strange names. Both sound similar enough, don’t they? And how do you know that the strangers didn’t lie to you?”

Schallempak gave Shan-Ti a desperate look. Did he doubt her sincerity or was he merely lamenting his current conversation?

“I don’t know,” he admitted meekly.

“I’m sealing all entrances to Observatory Two-Nine. Your encoder will be blocked. Stay calm. We’ll come to you.”

“But...” Schallempak spoke into nothingness, for the head had disappeared after the last word, the cone of light around it went out. The conversation was over.

“Wonderful,” said Lafcon, looking out the window.

“Outrageous,” said Razafimanantsoa. “He didn’t mention me at all.”

She was nervous, but she was able to hide the feeling; after all, she was one of the Haklui Guardians. They were reliable. She obeyed. She would prove that she was worth every ounce of trust. Trust was the currency of the Haklui.

She fingered her gun. A Diust V-7. They rarely carried anything like that. Weapons were not wanted, and therefore the Haklui avoided such calibers. She swore by her trusty P2, a short-barreled, handy service weapon. The Diust V-7, on the other hand, was heavier, more long-stemmed; it had several firing modes such as continuous fire, cluster fire, and interval, and above all, it could shoot both paralysis and thermal jets. Stun or kill.

She had never killed.

She swallowed, felt the settings. She didn't want to look at it.

The shadow trusted her.

The matriarch trusted her.

If she proceeded skillfully, no one would notice.

What an honor! The shadow and the matriarch!

In the past, she had to admit, she had never thought much of Belinkhar, but that was probably because of how close she had been to her father and sister. Then Belinkhar had come and promoted another to her place in the bodyguard.

Had she wanted revenge? Was a Nham no longer allowed to say if she disliked something? For example, that a cheater was not as suitable to govern *Ke-Matlon* as a tradition-conscious Nham? Of course, she knew that deep down, Belinkhar would always remain a Nham and face up to her duty. But the words had gushed out of her just like that...

And now there was an opportunity to rehabilitate oneself again. She would prove herself worthy of trust. Because she had to, and because she wanted to. The matriarch was counting on her.

"Come!" Etztak hurried past her. "We have a job to fulfill and too little time."

Casually, her hand slid into her pocket and felt the small, inconspicuous cylinder.

Everything would be fine...

“Be careful! Step back! Directly to the outer wall!” the voice rang out.

Shan-Ti, Tatum Moncreiffe, Razafimanantsoa, Schallempak, and the old Lafcon had already been waiting for half an hour, during which they were completely cut off from the outside world and even from the station’s computer system. The observatory had become dark except for the light cubes on the floor and the shimmering lines that framed the outside window.

The Mehandor, with whom Schallempak had spoken, supposedly occupied a particularly high rank on *Ke-Matlon*. He was the matriarch’s “shadow,” a kind of institutional provocateur and doubter. His name was Etztak, and he was not known for being particularly diplomatic or friendly; even among the Mehandor he was considered restless at best. This made Shan-Ti suspicious, but on the other hand…she could survive a few boorish sounds.

“He’s confusing us with Crest, Anne Sloane, and Tatiana Michalovna,” Moncreiffe had said several times with fervor.

Would Etztak realize his mistake? From what she had heard from him, he would not be at all pleased.

Razafimanantsoa helped Lafcon get up. The old Arkonide seemed annoyed. They had used the time since the call to discuss the meaning of the cosmos and to present their respective worlds of faith. Lafcon could not believe that two beings of the same people, living on the same planet, could have such fundamentally different beliefs. This, too, he claimed, was a sign of human immaturity.

Just as the Malagasy and the European woman were joining forces to prove to him the unity and solidarity of mankind, the bulkhead slid open and five Mehandor rushed in: four Haklui forces in the light green overalls and the darkly dressed “shadow” in the middle of them. With the exception of Etztak, all of them carried heavy, two-handed weapons. His gaze sharply fixed on the attendees.

Shan-Ti looked at the Haklui forces. Two men, two women, of indefinite age, all equally thin and a good head shorter than her. *Nham*, as this Mehandor clan called itself. The four of them seemed restless and worried. Maybe a little too nervous.

"The three of you are human?" Etztak snapped, pointing at Razafimanantsoa, Moncreiffe, and Shan-Ti in turn. "But you're not the one I'm looking for. And you...you are Crest da Zoltral?"

Lafcon pushed Razafimanantsoa's hand away and tried to stand alone. He swayed slightly, but his voice was firm. "My identity belongs to me. You don't tell me who I have to be! You're a citizen of the Empire, and..." He fell silent. "We're still in the Empire, aren't we?"

"Stop!" said Etztak coldly. "Otherwise, we'll calm you down."

"You cannot order me around!" Lafcon took a step towards the Mehandor. and Razafimanantsoa followed him.

Etztak waved one hand. "Paralysis!"

Two of the Haklui forces raised their weapons. Shan-Ti didn't know how she knew something terrible was going to happen, but she didn't wait for the two of them to fire. She threw herself to the side and dragged Schallempak with her, away from the area that fell within the weapons' range.

Moncreiffe grabbed Razafimanantsoa by the wrist and jerked him away.

Razafimanantsoa's hand, which had just almost grabbed the Arkonide's shoulder, closed around empty air.

A beam of paralysis shot out of a gun. And from the other, a fiery lightning bolt that set the old man on fire.

Shan-Ti's face turned gray.

Surely that was just a nightmare?

The old Arkonide didn't make a sound; he just stood there. Orange-red flames crept over him like fine hairs. They spread all across the body from a cherry-red glowing circular bullet hole in the neck. He just stood there with this confused look on his face. Then, without a word or any discernible emotion, he collapsed.

"Nobody was given orders to use deadly force!" barked Etztak. He glared angrily at his security forces. "You there! Haklui Kera! Explain!"

The person addressed stood there, her face all but chiseled from stone. "An oversight, sir. I don't know how this could have happened. There has already been a malfunction of the V-7in the garden of the Nham. I'm sure—"

"There will be consequences!" He stretched out his hand, demanding. "Give me the gun! You will have to answer to the matriarch later."

She bowed curtly and handed him the gun. Etztak weighed it thoughtfully in his hand. There was something lurking on his face.

"Get rid of the man, Haklui Jarad, and take the Swoon with you. Medostation. Suspicion of shock. The two women are staying here."

He looked Shan-Ti straight in the eye. His lips smiled thinly and wickedly. She thought of the dead Arkonide, and a terrible suspicion came over her.

14.

On Mars

+ + + Dossiers of Bradbury Base: Life forms of Mars + + +

+ + + BR-BA 851 — Microorganisms and flora + + +

Preliminary remark: The high dose of UV radiation complicates the development of life on Mars.

Atmosphere: Methane levels may have been caused by methanogenic bacteria that are exceptionally resistant to nutrient deficiencies, cold, and darkness.

Surface: Certain surface structures created by erosion have long suggested that they are not of purely natural origin; however, the existence of a people inhabiting Mars can be ruled out. Organic carbon-based substances are not detectable, and test series on metabolic activities remain ambiguous.

Water resources: Large amounts of frozen water are found at the poles of Mars.

Planetary crust: Microbes could be detected deep in the ground.

“Cyr! Wait! Wait, Cyr!”

Behind Aescunnar there was the sound of hasty footsteps, first as if from boots, then like clawed feet.

Tweel!

Aescunnar ran as if his life depended on it. In fact, it probably did. And if it cost him the last reserves of air: he would not let Tweel lead him to the slaughterhouse. He wouldn’t!

He turned into a corridor and froze. The corridor ended at a wall

after five meters. A wall decorated with a relief!

He turned around. He had to analyze these images; they were perhaps the key to understanding Mars. Were they the same Morse code and the flower-like patterns again? But where were the insects and the bats?

No, he didn't have time. He couldn't take his time, because otherwise he would...

The footsteps came closer; the shouts grew louder.

"Cyr, I can explain!"

Aescunnar breathed shallowly. No, Tweel, who had pretended to be Hetcher, couldn't explain that. He should have figured it out long ago. Hetcher could not speak. That had been the first mistake, but he hadn't understood it.

Slowly, he walked backwards.

"Cyr! I don't want to hurt you! Now wait!"

The historian groped one last time over the sublime patterns...and felt the wall bounce gently like a thick foam mat.

He applied a little more pressure. The wall continued to give way. A little more...

"Cyr?"

With a soft smack, the wall sucked him in and spat him out backwards. He stumbled back, carried by his own momentum, and fell splashing onto his buttocks.

Splashing?

Aescunnar looked around; he was sitting in a small pond with the water reaching his chest—

Water! There's water on Mars! he thought, surprised.

Only then did he notice the brightness: although the ceiling and walls told him that he was still under the surface of Mars, the cave was illuminated as bright as day. The light came from the rock itself, different shades of brightness mixed together: red, yellow, blue, green...

He stood up, the water running down his space suit. Above him, certainly thirty meters high, hung the ceiling of the huge hall. The walls were far away, and plants grew everywhere. It was like a gigantic artificial jungle with scaly trees, giant ferns, and orchids. And tulips. Hummingbird-headed bats fluttered from flower to flower, trilling a song reminiscent of the gurgling of water.

Aescunnar was obviously standing in an environment that should not exist on Mars. Not anymore or not yet. But if this wasn't Mars, where had he landed? Had that...rock membrane brought him to another planet like the transmitters of the Vega system? Or did it represent the transition to a parallel reality, a new, hitherto unimagined universe? Or, and this was probably the worst fear, all of this was...deception? Had Tweel been just the first stage of delusion? Was this now the second? And what would be the third? Because there were certainly three stages, at least. Maybe seven like the seven cardinal sins. Or like Dante's circles of Hell...

No. A very simple way to check if what surrounded him was real was to look at the displays on his suit.

Ambient temperature ten degrees Celsius plus, air pressure 336 millibar, air mixture acceptable.

Aescunnar was astonished. 336 millibars was only a third of the air pressure he was used to on Earth, but at least in an area like that, he would have on Chomolungma, on Mount Everest. Hardly breathable for him, but many times better than the atmospheric pressure on the surface of Mars, which was previously below one percent of the pressure on Earth.

This was one of the first problems faced in terraforming of the Red Planet: the equalization of atmospheric pressure. The engineers had to strengthen the magnetic field and prevent the air from escaping with thin protective screens. Without this or a comparable

procedure, it would not work. For a technology like the Arkonides had, which could counteract gravity, it was also possible to increase the pressure in reverse, thereby tying the atmosphere more closely to its world. The Ferrons certainly knew how to do that—after all, they had experience in colonizing other worlds.

The atmosphere was the linchpin of all questions concerning future life on Mars. The Martian atmosphere consisted of more than ninety-five percent carbon dioxide and about three percent nitrogen. In order to create breathable air, the proportion of carbon dioxide had to be reduced to around one-third percent by volume, while at the same time oxygen had to be added, ideally up to a quarter of the air mass. All this would happen much faster as soon as the first plants were able to grow and start the photosynthetic cycle. But until, or rather if, it succeeded across the board, a lot of time, work and money had to be invested.

It was an impressive project that humanity had initiated for the year 2037, the development of its own solar system, but only measured against the status of 2035. When you consider that there were now basically many more possibilities, the spread of humanity across an entire galaxy thanks to the transition engine, the Mars terraforming project seemed downright modest.

And now Aescunnar was standing in a cave that was exceptionally warm for Mars at around ten degrees Celsius in springtime, in which the air was still extremely thin, but basically breathable. The plant life that thrived in this place robbed the air of carbon dioxide and enriched it with oxygen.

He knew it was impossible. Still, it seemed so incredibly real.

Another lie, he thought. *I have landed in a Garden of Eden that will kill me as soon as I get rid of my protective clothing.*

Had Adam felt that way after eating the fruit of knowledge? So defenseless that he at least covered his shame?

An amusing thought occurred to the historian. What did this mythological fruit of knowledge taste like? If he had to judge by his own real-life experience, it would certainly have been an

unpleasant, bitter taste, just as he had felt when he had discovered that Hetcher...well, was no longer himself. But if that first fruit should have tasted bitter, which of course was never mentioned in the fairy tales of ancient religions, why did man still strive for knowledge? What drove him to relive that unpleasant taste over and over again? Were they all nothing more than animals that kept biting into unripe, unpeeled oranges and getting upset about the taste? Or animals that swallowed whole nuts because they didn't understand how to eat them?

In the course of his professional years, Aescunnar had acquired a certain distance from people. The more he looked into the past, the more visible to him the primal urges that dominated life became, and the more dubious all the banal truths that had been put on him in childhood like extra layers of clothing seemed to him. For a child, it was good to know. As a result, he grew up, became stronger, more viable. But once he had outgrown childhood, it actually became more important to doubt. Real doubt could only be based on knowledge and cognition. And only this real doubt allowed for true questions and made it possible to broaden one's horizons. Once he had looked beyond the narrow horizon of knowledge and questioned everything, he could recognize himself and return to the limits of knowledge, but within limits that he had set for himself, because infinity was a beautiful longing, but nothing in which one could live.

It's strange that "Hetcher" isn't following me, he thought suddenly. Did the creature that was hiding in Hetcher's body not know about this passage? Or was he somehow forbidden from entering? Couldn't Tweel pass through the spongy rock membrane?

It was possible. Tweel deformed his body as soon as pressure was applied to it, but the rock only let through those who pressed against it with sufficient force. That would be too good to be true. It would also make sense that he had wanted to stop Aescunnar. On the other hand, Hetcher may have just wanted to defend his homeland and keep people away from it. In that case, Aescunnar would have to reckon with other Tweels in this place...

He looked around, looking for the passage. But there was no gate, no marking, no relief with mysterious clues. Was he at an

impasse? Did the passage only work one way?

His gaze fell again on the bat-hummingbirds. Were they the ones immortalized on the tunnel walls? If so, he was probably still on Mars. Perhaps he would also find traces of the insects. He felt that he was close to the great secret.

If only the strange creatures would pay attention to him! They didn't seem like they were intelligent. He would have given a lot to be able to talk to them directly, but the prevailing air pressure would take his breath away, if the air was breathable at all. The suit defined it as acceptable, but what did that mean? In order to know this in more detail, he would have to analyze its composition. Apart from the fact that he didn't know how to do something like that, he also had no idea to what extent his suit was equipped with the appropriate equipment. After all, he was not a scientist; no one had ever pointed out to him in his classes on antiquity, the Middle Ages, or the early modern period that one day he might be standing on an alien planet.

Well, maybe when his supply of air ran out, he would just put all his eggs in one basket and open the helmet. But he was not prepared to do so as long as the spacesuit protected him. He was lucky that the durable material had survived the past few hours, especially the already damaged area.

He took a few steps to get out of the small pond where he had stood so amazed and thoughtful. The ground beneath his feet felt soft like damp moss, and when he looked closer, he realized that a reddish-brown moss with many small orange flowers covered the ground.

He knelt down to run his hand over it. Where the glove touched it, tiny, shimmering droplets of water emerged from the fine branches of the plant like a sponge and were sucked in again only moments later.

Aescunnar got up and walked on slowly. Every few steps, he stopped and looked around. Nothing threatening could be seen. The plants were what they seemed to be: plants and not evil alien creatures ready to pounce on an unsuspecting victim who had so

suddenly fallen into their clutches. The bat-hummingbirds apparently had no interest in him either. They did not allow themselves to be disturbed as they went about their work. There were enough colorful flowers into which they could dip their beaks, so a giant in a dirt-repellent, odorless protective suit was not particularly attractive.

But he didn't see any signs of insects. Along the rock walls, lush dark green plants with thick, leathery, lenticular leaves grew in direct light. They seemed to store a lot of water. Several stems protruded from the moss floor at the same time and formed a kind of tendril bushes that clung to the stone walls with fine hairs like ivy. These plants did not bear any flowers.

Directly in front of it, he saw a kind of vegetation belt made of something that most reminded him of a palm tree, at least the leaves. The trunk boasted pineapple-shaped and only knee-high, scaly shaped, pinnate tufts of leaves, very thin and folded several times into V-shaped gutters. With this, the scaled palms probably caught water and directed it to the trunk and roots. But where did the water come from? There must have been enough in the ground, and surely there could be no rain inside the cave?

The answer would have to wait, if he had that much time.

However, the tulips that grew and bloomed up to waist-high were the most diverse. Only a few grew so big; most did not even reach his knee, and they were not actually *t*ulips, but at least this conceptual analogy was enough to designate them provisionally. After all, Aescunnar was not a botanist.

The tulips grew sometimes solo, but mostly in small groups, as if someone had planted a handful of bulbs too densely, and often they were grouped around no more than half a dozen small trees with red, knobby trunks and light blue, dense, fern-like foliage.

The historian cautiously went further. This place, for all its obvious harmlessness, was scary. Who had built it once?

Could something like this be of natural origin in a place like Mars? This was about as logical as assuming that the Hanging

Gardens of Babylon had come into being without human intervention. Aescunnar was on the lookout for relics of the unknown builders. Had they been the same ones who had made the bas-reliefs?

There was a faint gurgle beneath his feet as he walked on. He listened. Had there been something? He was sure he had heard something.

"Hello?" He turned around once. "Is there anybody? I come in peace!"

He cursed himself inwardly for it. It was one of the stupidest sentences of all time, and practically every time someone had said it, it had been a lie.

No one answered him; only the moss chuckled contently as he lifted his shoe to go one step farther.

We hear you.

Aescunnar was frightened. He spun around as best his spacesuit would allow, lost his balance, and crashed into one of the red-stemmed palm trees. His hands searched for support, and he managed to hold on to one of the fronds and regain his footing.

Then he felt a small, sharp pain. He quickly let go of the palm frond. Where he had attacked the leaf, several small needle-like hairs protruded, which in the tree's normal state were probably folded up on the leaf's body.

Hopefully these palm trees aren't poisonous! he thought worriedly. When he heard the fine hiss, however, he suddenly realized that poison did not have to be his main concern: the palm needles had pierced his suit with small holes and he was losing air.

"Damn!" He said it very calmly, more like a diagnosis than a curse. Then he tried to silence the hissing by pressing his hands to other parts of the protective suit.

It was in vain.

We wanted your death... said the chorus of voices he had heard before.

Then he remembered what he had overlooked so far: the ornaments.

He felt nauseous, and then blackness rolled over him and—

...but not anymore...

—swallowed him.

15.

On Snowman

+ + + Dossiers of the *Tosoma*: Interkosmo + + +

Interkosmo is a simple lingua franca for humanoids developed by the Mehandor. It is characterized by a high level of commitment of a few rules and the defined functionality of prefixes, suffixes, and infixes as carriers of grammatical information. The omission of certain articles, the reduction of times and, if necessary, gender assignment via word endings also contribute to simplification.

"Rrrrrriiii!"

Gucky's eyes widened.

Something massive, something big threw itself at him, making a high, thin scream.

He darted to the side, but he was too slow; a white, almost transparent claw whizzed down and drove into the backpack of his suit. There was a flash; he saw sparks flying and going out. The claw was burned black and was hastily pulled back.

"That's what you get, you beast," Gucky commented, but another claw rushed up, this time on the other side. With the courage of desperation, Gucky grabbed it and knocked it away. Then he activated his protective forcefield.

Well, he tried to activate it. But nothing happened. The beast that had attacked him had done a great job with its first hit. If Gucky had believed in something like a fate-determining authority, it would have been time to accuse her of arbitrariness or malice.

But the mousebeaver did not believe in such a thing. And at the moment he didn't have time for it at all: he saw above him a large,

shield-shaped body with four…six legs. But where was the head? Probably right above him.

That too, he thought, and reached with his telekinetic power to push the creature away. It was more than twice as long and wide as the polecat and white-gray in color, so it was perfectly camouflaged on Snowman.

He saw Rhodan and Thora sit up with difficulty, raising their weapons.

"Out with you! This is my fight. Make sure we aren't get disturbed. And if you don't want to attract the Arkonides, put away those stupid guns!"

"Rrrrriiiiii!" shrieked his opponent, waving his legs helplessly in the air and spitting at him.

A milky liquid clapped against the ice next to Gucky's head.

"And now don't bother me anymore. I'll…manage!" he gasped.

He telekinetically pushed his attacker even farther back, causing him to get to his feet. The high-pitched, unpleasant screech grew louder when the creature suddenly lost contact with the ground. "Rrrrriiiiii!"

"Oh, shut up!" cried Gucky, trying to tighten his grip. "And above all, keep quiet!"

No matter how hard he tried, he failed to stop his attacker from fidgeting, and the creature's legs were long enough to catch him in the worst case.

If I were in full possession of my powers…

"Rrrrriiiiii!"

He looked at his opponent. He would have expected a large, shaggy animal with fat and heat pads in this world. But what attacked him certainly didn't have a gram of fat on its body. It looked like a pale, giant stink bug. The tiny head was almost

completely hidden in the insect's pronotum.

At that moment, a trunk hissed out of its head towards Gucky and hit the helmet disc of his spacesuit. It crackled.

"Stop, friend!" shouted Gucky, pushing the huge insect back a little farther.

It cost him a lot of effort; his inner reserves were far from restored.

Yuck.

The whitish-green liquid ran down the helmet disc. Hopefully this creature wasn't spitting acid!

The giant bug bucked against the invisible hold.

Gucky groaned. *This is going to be harder than I thought. I should have accepted Rhodan's help.*

"Rrrrrrriiiii!"

And with this cry, the bug broke free.

Rhodan and Thora stood back to back in the snow. They had long since closed their helmets again. The headlamps swept through the shimmering combination of snow, ice, and the depths of the night.

"What kind of animal was that?" asked Thora.

"Are you sure it was just an animal?" asked Rhodan.

Thora snorted. "When will you finally believe a space-savvy woman?"

"Perhaps if she doesn't wreck the next ship I entrust to her," he replied with amusement.

For a moment, he thought she would rebuke him, but then she

laughed dryly. “Can you follow the tracks of the...attacker?” She changed the subject.

Rhodan looked around. “Nothing to see.”

“That’s bad. These beasts could be all around us. Maybe we should shoot first and ask later?”

“And attract Novaal?”

Thora nudged him with her shoulder. “Forget that! We can handle that fool. Gucky won’t be a second Reg.”

He understood immediately. *Gucky sent us away like Reg...*

“Let’s go!”

They turned around in sync and went back to their shelter.

“Rrrrrrriiiii!” The giant pale bug repelled itself vigorously with the rearmost pair of legs. The two front legs fanned wide apart, the claws at the end clicked apart.

They look like bamboo poles, Gucky thought, and put all his remaining strength into a telekinetic blow against the area of the being where he knew the head was hiding.

“Get away from me!”

The animal roared, there was no other way to define it, and crashed into the ice wall. Something fell out of its shell: it looked like a piece of antenna.

Staggering and uncoordinated, the bug got up again. It now rested on all six legs. “Rrrrriiiii!”

Gucky held his breath as the predator turned around and staggered towards the exit.

Let’s go after it! he thought and limped off. The fight had taken a toll on him.

He ran straight into Rhodan and Thora, who in turn almost collided with the giant bug. But the animal ignored them and ran away.

“Let’s go!” cried Gucky.

Thora looked at him blankly. “Little one, are you out of your senses? Be glad we got rid of the beast.”

Rhodan, on the other hand, seemed to understand what the mousebeaver was getting at. “You hope that—”

“That’s right,” Gucky interrupted. “Come on, we can also chat on the go. I have no desire to lose track of this bug and then wander endlessly through ice and snow. After all, my name is not Homer Odysseus.”

Rhodan trudged through the snow next to him. “Homer was only the author, not the first name. And Odysseus crossed the ocean for twenty years before he found his way back home.”

“Oh, you people!” Gucky laughed. “What’s Snowman but a frozen ocean? You’re just thinking too hard. But I have to admit, twenty years would be too long even for me. By then, they might have summer here again. And there’s hardly anything that smells worse than wet Ilt fur, at least for an Ilt with style.”

Although Gucky tried hard to sound light-hearted, Rhodan certainly didn’t believe it for a second. By now, they knew the little creature far too well for that.

Initially, Rhodan was able to follow the trail of the predatory bug well enough, but the longer they tracked it, the weaker the trail became. Wind and snow hid the features from overly prying eyes, as if Snowman wanted to protect its inhabitants from the strangers. Even the infrared sensors did not provide any information. The bug seemed to radiate as little heat as an iceberg.

When the wind tormented the protective suits with icy needles, Thora, who formed the rear of the small group, asked, “So, what

exactly are you hoping to find, Gucky?"

Rhodan noticed that she was neither addressing him directly nor looking at him. Oh well. At the moment, he had other worries.

"When I fought with my friend Benito..."

Rhodan interrupted him: "Benito? You don't want us to believe that the predatory bug is intelligent and is called Benito, do you?"

Gucky wrinkled his nose. "Did I say that?" he asked indignantly. "No, I named the little animal Benito. I think it looked like a Benito."

Thora laughed suppressed. "Get to it!"

Gucky trudged on through the snow. "Don't dawdle. So, where was I? That's right: Benito. When we were fighting with each other, I tried to get into his thoughts. And do you want me to tell you something? He only had a handful, so even less than..."

He swallowed. Rhodan knew exactly what he had been saying and who he was trying to tease. But Bull was no longer there.

"Well, at least not much. But I could feel his basic feelings, and they were focused on warmth, comfort, security, safety, and food. In other words: ideal for us. All we have to do is follow Benito and then throw him out of his own apartment."

Thora nodded. "It shouldn't be a problem with our weapons. At least if the burrow of your monster beetle is deep down in the ice. And we can also make better use of our battle suits."

Gucky turned around. "You see, Perry? It was so easy that it was even..." He fell silent and showed his one big gnawing tooth with a grin when he noticed Thora's scowling look. "No offense."

It was ultimately Rhodan who found the predatory bug's den. They had already walked past it twice, so exquisitely was the entrance camouflaged. But by chance or a lucky coincidence, Rhodan walked a few steps lower along the slope the third time and spotted a vertical line that shouldn't have been there.

He walked a little closer to it and stood in front of a cave entrance almost perfectly camouflaged by snowdrifts and reflective ice. He beckoned his companions to come closer.

“And now?” Thora asked over her helmet radio. She may have been an excellent astronaut, but she did not seem particularly well prepared for such hunting expeditions.

“I’ll go first,” Rhodan announced. “You’ll stay close behind me. When we get inside, I’ll go left, you’ll go right. Shoot the moment you see movement. No risks, understood?”

He knew, even without words, that he could rely on the Arkonide. Her curt nod was enough for him.

So let’s go, he thought. “You’re waiting out here until we call you, Gucky.”

“Of course, boss,” said Gucky. The Ilt would, however, interpret this more freely...

16.

On board Ke-Matlon

+ + + Dossiers of the *Tosoma*: Foreign peoples + + +

+ + + TO-FV 7 — Mehandor + + +

The Mehandor are mainly active in galactic trade. They are organized into extended families (clans) and have to assert themselves against the market power of large corporations as well as the Empire. They are a humanoid people; by living in an artificial environment, they are more delicate than the people of Earth. As a hair color, red dominates.

The loyalty of the individual seems to belong solely to the clan. According to previous information, there is no overarching state order. Within the clan, Mehandor enjoy great personal freedom and a secure existence as long as they submit to the absolute rule of the matriarch or patriarch.

The highest ideal of the Mehandor is loyalty to the contract. If you keep your part of a contract with the Mehandor, you can blindly rely on the other person. But if you break a contract, the Mehandor drop all considerations.

A distinctive feature of the Mehandor culture is the custom of “cheating.” Mehandor leave the clan on their own and hire themselves out on spaceships of different cultures. Most of them return to the clan after a few years and bring valuable experience and knowledge with them.

The Mehandor use cylindrical ships of up to several kilometers in length. They are (nearly) unarmed cargo stalls; warships are unknown, as the Mehandor rely on strict neutrality.

“Everything happened as you wished,” Etztak said.

The four Haklui guards stood to his left and right, staring blankly into space.

All. Well, let's say, almost *everything*, Belinkhar thought, bowing her head and saying, "It was quick?"

Etztak laughed softly. "That wasn't explicitly demanded. But yes."

"And the two women?"

"Nothing has happened to them except a little medical treatment. They have just been taken to the hangar to join the others. We exchanged their identity cards for those of the dead. The Naats won't notice anything."

She leaned forward. "And you're sure that the attribution isn't recognizable as a fake?"

The shadow took a step back. "Novaal won't examine them; he's only interested in Crest da Zoltral."

"Don't be too confident! Are the names so widely recognizable that it will be enough?"

Etztak made an affirmative gesture. "Don't worry."

"And the Swoon?"

He smiled joylessly. "He won't reveal anything. He doesn't know anything."

She leaned back again and crossed her legs.

"My worries are diminishing. And now prepare everything. In the meantime, I'll take care of the Naat."

Novaal was almost twice as tall and almost three times as wide as the delicate Belinkhar. She became acutely aware of this as she stood next to him. She forced herself to breathe shallowly because she perceived the Naat's body odor as particularly intrusive: it

smelled like damp leather and Nendin flowers, an unpleasant mixture.

The squadron commander had thrown on a beige, one-piece uniform, which tightened strongly at the broad shoulders and hips. Whoever had made it was either not very familiar with Naat anatomy or simply didn't care about it. Belinkhar suspected the latter. She knew the Arkonide military and its attitudes well enough.

There's no such thing as "doesn't fit," she thought, catching herself grinning. She quickly put an end to her grin, though. The situation was not at all exhilarating. She knew the Naats' propensity for violence with regard to a presumed disrespect well enough to know when she had to keep a low profile.

A holo conversation with one of the giants was exhausting enough but at least not directly dangerous. It was quite different to stand next to Novaal. Mehandor were a good head smaller than other humanoids and rather slender. For the leather-skinned Naats and their constitution, they were not a challenge, while for Belinkhar they seemed uncanny, unapproachable, and threatening.

Novaal stared at the captured people, who may have all looked as alike to him as Naats did to Belinkhar. In the *Quarqino*, normally a mix of arcade, bar, and contact exchange and one of *Ke-Matlon's* largest permanent installations, the 331 people stood close together. A permanent, unintelligible murmur filled the room.

Belinkhar could literally feel what was going on inside them. It was the old question of where to go and why. The core of the essence of the Mehandor.

She hated being reduced to a spectator. To be bossed around on her own station. That wouldn't make her look good in front of the Nham.

My sister even wins points against me while she's dead, she thought. *I must be a terrible failure as a matriarch. My shadow betrays me, disappoints me, and a Naat tells me what to do.*

“You!” thundered Novaal, baring white, sharp teeth. He turned slowly so that everyone could look into his three eyes and swayed slightly back and forth. “You!” he repeated, even louder.

The murmurs of the prisoners died down.

“You will go one by one to this exit without any sign of resistance.” He pointed to the gold-studded entrance door of the Quarqino. “My soldiers will then accompany you aboard the *Keat’ark*. We are authorized to use force.”

A murmur went through those present.

“What are you going to do with us?” asked someone in the third row.

“Questions will not be tolerated!” roared Novaal, much louder than appropriate, even if he had considered this question a provocation. “You will be handed over to the Empire by *Ke-Matlon*.”

The invisible speaker did not dare to make any further statements, and the people were otherwise silent. But they were silent in such a stubborn way that even a brute like the Naat had to feel it. Novaal, however, did not indicate whether he felt anything but arrogance and aggression.

Like an irritated Lirsh, Belinkhar thought. Would her plan work?

“Let’s go to the directorate,” she pleaded. “Our presence here is no longer necessary. Your people and mine are in control of the loading of the prisoners, aren’t they?”

“Follow me!” commanded Novaal curtly, as if he were in command, which, unfortunately, was true.

No sooner had they left the *Quarqino* and reached the directorate from which this section of *Ke-Matlon* was administered than Novaal stopped Belinkhar with a quick wave of his hand.

“You think I’m stupid, little Nham, I can feel that. But I don’t see Crest da Zoltral,” Novaal said from above, so quietly that it seemed to be the Naat equivalent of a confidential whisper.

“Crest,” said Belinkhar, fixing her gaze on the giant’s horrible, expressionless face.

We will find him, no matter where he is hiding. Nothing is hidden from me on Ke-Matlon*, not in the long run. Crest will reveal everything to me. His secret. Precious commodity.*

“There was an...incident,” she said.

As if on command, a bulkhead opened. Four Haklui forces and Etztak pushed in three stretchers. A tremor ran through the titanic body of the Naat. Novaal shifted his weight.

“Incident,” he said blankly. A large black hand closed around the back of Belinkhar’s head.

She heard her hair crackle and felt the pressure on her skull.

“Is that your incident?”

“In a way,” she admitted, pointing to the three bodies: two women, an old man, all burned almost beyond recognition. “Here are Crest da Zoltral and the two women who accompanied him, Anne Sloane and Tatiana Michalovna.”

“Crest da Zoltral,” said Novaal, leaning over the corpses. His nostrils fluttered slightly.

Then he took his hand from Belinkhar’s head. He grabbed the Arkonide and lifted him up. Not gently, as the Nham would have expected, but as if he were reaching for a pile of rags. Maybe “Crest” was exactly that for the Naat; who could say? For him, something like piety towards the deceased, respect for life may not apply or only be expected in a very special context that a non-Naat would never understand.

Belinkhar held her breath. She had been a cheater and had experienced many different cultures, but even the interesting visit was only a highlight. To claim to understand a completely different culture was like trying to identify one of Gedt-Kemar’s huge ice formations in darkness after pointing a flashlight at it for a second.

“Crest da Zoltral,” said Novaal, shaking the corpse. Carelessly, he let him fall back and then did the same with the two women. “Tatiana Michalovna and Anne Sloane. Did they have any documents with them?”

Belinkhar stared in horror at the caked bodies. A weapon malfunction had caused this, fortunately for the station, but still...she was certainly not squeamish, but looking at these terribly maimed bodies cost her more strength than she had left. She turned around and choked.

An acidic, slimy liquid shot up through her esophagus. She spat it out. A quick glance showed her that the Haklui were not doing much better. Only one of the women looked at her, directly, openly, calmly, and nodded curtly, so that with a little luck no one else saw it. Etztak remained outwardly equanimous.

Traitor! Without you, this would not have been necessary. These three could still be alive. You’re forcing me to do bad business!

She said aloud, “If they had something with them, it certainly didn’t stand up to the thermal beam any more than the humans. What did you expect?”

Novaal stomped and swept one arm over the stretcher on which the woman named Tatum was lying. With a disgusting, dull burst and wet clap, she landed on the floor.

“I expect order and precision! Care!”

“We are a civilian station, not a military one! In addition, this is already the second incident with this weapons model. Everything is in the logbooks. We will have to complain about it. It would be unthinkable if even more people lost their lives as a result of a manufacturing defect.”

The Naat’s hand shot forward and wrapped itself around her head again before she could retreat.

By the stellar winds of Gefirna, she thought. *He suspects something!*

“A curious coincidence, isn’t it?” said the Naat dully. “Crest, of

all people...”

“That’s life,” she replied coldly. “A series of strange coincidences ...”

His hand exerted stronger pressure. He could crush her effortlessly; that was his message. But he wouldn’t do it. Not without real reason.

“Show me!” demanded Novaal. “You’ve documented everything, haven’t you?”

“I can view the camera logs,” she said.

“Do that! I want to see it. Not you. I don’t trust you. Him.” Novaal pointed to Etztak.

Belinkhar signaled to Etztak. “Do it for me. Quick!”

Etztak shook his head, but he walked briskly to the terminal. As he did so, he grazed one of the Haklui and angrily pushed her away. An empty AutoInject ampoule fell to the ground.

It’s done, Belinkhar thought, feeling strangely shabby at the moment of triumph. *After all, he still shows nerves.*

“Aren’t you well?” she asked.

Etztak grumbled unwillingly. His hands flew over the control panels, unlocking the necessary connections. At first glance, it looked fast and routine, completely self-assured, but wasn’t he shaking a little?

Novaal seemed to notice it as well. “Is there a problem, Shadow?”

Etztak looked up. A single fine bead of sweat appeared on his forehead. “I’ve unlocked the recordings. Should I start playback?”

“Wait.” Novaal’s hand lifted from Belinkhar’s head. He took a data crystal from the pocket of his uniform and handed it to Etztak. “Request a final profile comparison. Here you have the necessary

data. We want to be sure."

Belinkhar's stomach turned. In the end, had the Naat requested biometric comparative data on Crest? In that case, their bluff was over. As was her time in office. What would happen to her clan, she did not dare to imagine.

Etztak carefully took the crystal in his hand. Such a small, inconspicuous thing... Then he put it in the receiving shaft and locked it in place. "We're ready to go."

A film showed the scene in Observatory 39, which had only recently occurred. Novaal looked at the people intensely. His long arms swayed at his sides. Had he become suspicious? Would he realize that it was not Crest, not Anne Sloane, and not Tatiana Michalovna? It was clear that it was an accident...although it hadn't been one at all, but only she and Etztak knew that. And soon only they—

It's going to happen at any moment, she thought. *Any moment...*

And just at that moment it burst out of Etztak. He laughed out loud, snatched a Haklui's weapon, and fired at the screen and terminal. Then threw the gun at the surprised Naat's head and pounced on Belinkhar.

"You!" he howled. "You don't deserve to follow in your sister's footsteps! You are bad, corrupt from the ground up!"

Belinkhar took a step back, but Etztak was faster despite his mass. His hands were just about to close around her thin neck when Novaal pulled back the shadow.

Etztak tumbled to the ground and laughed loudly. As if catapulted by an invisible spring, he came up again. Sweat stood on his forehead, his eyes gleamed feverishly.

"What's his problem?" asked the Naat, holding him tightly.

Belinkhar hesitated for a precise moment. "I'm not an expert, but judging by the symptoms, he must have been in contact with Kan'or. A drug that is sold on the Web. We can call in a doctor."

Novaal pressed Etztak against the melted terminal, all anger concentrated in his words. “How can you allow trade with Kan’or? It’s immoral.”

Etztak yelped. Threads of saliva dripped from the corners of his mouth, his hands clasped the Naat’s arm and tugged at it.

“I won’t let it happen,” Belinkhar said. “Trade in Kan’or on *Ke-Matlon* is illegal.”

Novaal’s hand moved to Etztak’s neck and squeezed. Etztak whispered.

“Your statement can’t be true. If you have given a precise instruction, no trade can have taken place. But apparently it is still taking place. How is that possible?”

Over Etztak’s heavy, rattling breath, Belinkhar said, “My power has limits.”

Novaal let Etztak fall to the ground. “That’s obviously exactly your problem. You don’t work cleanly enough. If there is will, there are no limits.”

He raised a communicator to his mouth. “Novaal here. Three robots to my location. Removal of a Kan’or victim.”

“Stop!” cried Belinkhar. She raised a hand. “Etztak is not subject to your jurisdiction.”

Novaal laughed softly, grumbling. “All of you here are subject to imperial power. We’ll take the man with us, and you won’t do anything about it, Nham.” He pronounced her clan name like a curse.

“You have what you want. Leave our home now!” Belinkhar ordered. Her voice vibrated slightly. Had he noticed?

“I will. Soon. But you are mistaken. Something is still missing.”

Belinkhar was taken aback. “What could that be?”

“Thora da Zoltral. I need her. Either alive or like him.” He pointed to the corpse of the ancient Arkonide.

She stood crammed in between other people and wondered why there was this strange gap in her thoughts.

I’m... she faltered as she read the name on her ID. It read “Sheila Wingey.” *I’m Anne Shan-Ti. I... I was looking for Crest.*

What had happened to her, to the others? They faced an uncertain future, for they had left *Ke-Matlon* and were now prisoners of the Naats aboard an Arkonide combat ship. But what would happen to her now? What did these Naats intend to do with her? A slave for the Empire?

Shan-Ti looked at the woman next to her, supposedly named “Caylin Nakis,” and squeezed her hand. She was Tatum Moncreiffe, but like Shan-Ti, she was wearing a different ID card than usual. What was going on?

Then Shan-Ti saw Razafimanantsoa just a few steps away. She nudged her neighbor, and the prelate also saw her. The two smiled.

All three of them had survived and they would live. Together, because together they were strong.

They were humans.

The Haklui waited until the Naat and his prisoner had left. When they could be sure that the matriarch was out of danger, they prepared to march. Just as the last Haklui force was about to leave the room, Belinkhar held her back with a wave of her hand.

The cold-eyed woman turned to the matriarch.

“Well done,” Belinkhar whispered, handing the woman a bag of heavy cloth.

The Haklui merely nodded, fleetingly counted the gems in the bag, and then disappeared as well.

Belinkhar took a deep breath. *That went well,* she thought. She was rid of the shadow and was able to go in search of Crest...as soon as the Naat was finally gone.

17..

On Mars

+ + + Dossiers of Bradbury Base: Terraforming + + +

+ + + BR-BA 65 — Project Mars + + +

Goal: Explore the possibilities of a terraforming project on Mars.

Technology: Mixture of terrestrial and Ferron technology (as the Ferrons have rich experience with hostile planets in their home system)

Procedure: Expeditions will be sent out from the main station (Bradbury Base in the Valles Marineris) and the smaller south polar station Sinharat Base in Planum Australe to explore the opportunities and limits of the planned project.

Bradbury Base (crew: 200) is surmounted by a transparent dome 400 meters in diameter and 30 meters high, under which the garden is located (oxygen and food supply). Near the dome, solar panels provide the energy supply. Beneath the surface of Mars, the residential quarters and other facilities are cylindrical container modules with a diameter of about five meters and a length of about fifteen meters. Other material (Mars mobiles, autonomous probes, spare parts, etc.) are stored in bays in the Martian soil and protected with tarpaulins.

Bradbury Base Commander: Nguyen (missing), Louanne Riembau (acting)

Aescunnar opened his eyes.

The plant ornaments...

The thought slipped away from him again. He lay on the red moss of the mysterious cavern, fully clothed in his space suit, and took a first conscious, deep breath of fresh air.

All around, light shone from the walls and ceiling in different colors. And beside him crouched Hetcher, who looked at him intently.

Aescunnar got up. It wasn't Hetcher! If one last piece of proof was needed, it was now available: Hetcher sat next to him without a spacesuit. The blue-skinned man wore an orange jumpsuit and had no breathing problems.

He gently placed a hand on Aescunnar's chest when the historian made an effort to rise. He smiled but didn't seem familiar with the facial expression. It swayed back and forth over his face.

"Don't be afraid!"

"I'm not afraid!" said Aescunnar defiantly. "And you're not Hetcher. I've seen through you."

Hetcher—no, he had to stop thinking of him as Hetcher! What he saw in front of him was Tweel, briefly increasing the pressure with his hand so that it became almost painful. Then he suddenly he took it away, and his smile faded into sadness.

"You're wrong."

Aescunnar braced himself with his forearms. "You killed Hetcher and took his form, whoever or whatever you may be!"

Fake Hetcher stood up slowly. "Yes, Hetcher is dead. In a way. But I didn't kill him. And he saved your life."

He pointed to an empty hazmat suit lying limply behind Cyr. "The air supply of his suit has complemented yours. With his help, I was able to seal the leak."

Aescunnar shuddered. "What do you mean 'in a way'? And how did he die, if not by your hand?"

Tweel spread his arms. Wave-like movements ran through him, as if four-fingered claws and arms were intruding against him from the inside. Then his flesh lay still again. Aescunnar shuddered. What was going on here?

"Hetcher...is dead. But he's alive."

Aescunnar sat up. He sensed that Tweel wasn't done yet and he didn't want to upset him. *Patience,* he warned himself.

The creature, who had once been Tweel and now looked like a bald, wrinkled Ferron, licked his lips nervously, and then said cautiously, as if any word could upset an intricate balance: "I... *I'm* Hetcher and I'm not."

"I don't quite understand," Aescunnar replied slowly.

"I knew it! I knew it!" Tweel hit his head with both hands, his face looking distorted. Again, what had been Tweel pulsed beneath the body like an eerie heartbeat.

"Hetcher was my friend," said the historian. "I was also his, which is often not a matter of course. That's why I want to know everything."

Hetcher/Tweel calmed down a bit. His face took on a hurried expression. "You... You are allowed to live. Must live. Die. Go. Stay." He looked confused. "Only one. One. Not two. Not five. One."

Aescunnar understood that the mysterious creature was suffering, but what was the reason for it? Was it the light radiation in this gigantic cavern full of life? They had landed in the most unlikely place on Mars, and it could well be that it was affecting Tweel. He speculated: what if the bas-reliefs had been some kind of information or warning signs in front of this area? Did this place confused the brains of Martians? Could that be the meaning of the box with the wavy lines? Or did these insect symbols stand for spiritual confusion as a metaphor of the Martian people?

He held out his right hand to Hetcher/Tweel, palm up. "Take my

hand. Calm down. I want to understand you."

Hetcher/Tweel looked through him and didn't move a muscle.

Let him. We'll explain it to you.

The tulips all around opened their eyes.

Aescunnar, who would have thought many things possible, but not that, gasped in amazement. The tulips had the calyxes unfolded, and on the inside of each oval leaf was a large, ciliated eye. In this way, each individual plant came to six eyes. Aescunnar did not see any other sensory organs.

Yes. It is us. You seem surprised.

They spoke to him in his thoughts. Of course!

"And you are..."

We're... We have been told many things. We are Santor. For you, we are half-sleepers.

"Half-sleepers?" echoed Aescunnar, confused.

It's complicated. You shouldn't be here. Not yet. We sleep in a semi-conscious state until we are needed.

"Needed?" Aescunnar felt as though someone was turning his thoughts around in his head with a large mixing spoon.

We'll know. The time is almost here. Therefore, you are allowed to live. And for another reason: you will be our messenger. Hetcher can't do that anymore. He probably would never have been able to; we now know that.

The "tulips" swayed synchronously, as if a gentle wind were blowing over them. But there was no wind. There could be no wind in this place...

"Not so fast. So, you're waiting for...something? And you want

me to tell people?"

We are waiting. We know. We hear and see. We talk, but hardly anyone can hear us half asleep. We have not awakened. You're talking into our dream.

Aescunnar took a deep breath. So, beneath the surface of Mars, there was a kind of intelligent creature that called itself Santor, or half-sleeper, and resembled the outwardly large tulips: red, orange, blue, purple, and yellow tulips. Mad. Did these colors have a meaning?

He felt the half-sleepers giggle, a chorus of bright girls' voices. *You wouldn't understand. They are reproductive colors.*

"But you are plants. Don't you multiply by dividing bulbs or something like that?" The question came out before he could think about it.

The half-sleepers laughed, fading away, then a clear thought came. *You wanted to know what about Hetcher. He has been absorbed into us. His ego enriches us and makes it possible to talk to you as if you were asleep or we were awake. Without Hetcher, this would be unthinkable, and you would be like the other.*

"The other? You're talking about Commander Nguyen?"

That's what he let himself be called, yes. We didn't know beings like you. Those who came before you were different, and it was a very different time. We were not needed. They shunned us. We speak in a way that few beings can hear, and even fewer can understand. You probably call it telepathy. Nguyen could hear us, at least a little.

"But you killed him," said Cyr Aescunnar bitterly. "Just like Hetcher."

The creature that looked like Hetcher stirred when it heard his name, but it was just a flutter. Suddenly, a strange look came into his eyes.

"Cyr, that's not true," he whispered, and the historian had an uneasy feeling that at that moment it was really the real Hetcher

who was speaking to him from the unknown place beyond death. “Nguyen’s death was a terrible misfortune. The merger failed. The horror on his face was due to the realization that he would be denied what he was promised. I knew it when I found him, and I knew what I had to do.”

Hetcher/Tweel slowly and awkwardly stretched out a hand to Aescunnar, and he grasped it.

“The half-sleepers need me so that they can get in touch with you despite their sleep. And what they have to say…” He broke off.

We want you to deliver our message. We want our peace. You have come to our world and you are preparing to change its face. We do not want this. You are not allowed to do it. This planet is our home.

That was it? The Santor wanted to prevent Mars from being terraformed?

No, there had to be more to it and Aescunnar also suspected what that could be.

“I don’t believe you! Mars is a desert. Beings like you couldn’t have evolved here!”

The Santor shook themselves, some closed their calyxes again. *What do you know about life? Do we have to have originated here to call this place our home? Go. Go and be our messenger.*

Petal by petal slammed shut. The voice in his head no longer spoke.

When all the tulip calyxes were closed again, Hetcher/Tweel stirred again. “Come,” said the creature simply.

Aescunnar hesitated. “What’s going to happen to me now?”

“I’ll take you back to the Mars mobiles and out of this area. Go back to the people and tell them what you have learned.”

“Will you come with me?”

“My place is no longer on the surface. You’ll find me here whenever you’re looking for Hetcher.” Hetcher/Tweel put a hand on the man’s chest.

“Will anyone believe me?” asked Aescunnar.

His guide through the Arsia Mons merely smiled like the Sphinx.

Once Aescunnar was back in the vehicle, he noticed that all the images and data from the underground facility were stored in his suit. His old suit...

18.

On Snowman

“Damn!” Rhodan jumped backward and pulled his weapon. He had just crossed the short, rather steep downhill corridor and stepped into a cave, when something threw itself at him. “Thora! Come...”

“Rrrriiii!” said the pale giant bug, and snapped at him. His weapon flew into the snow, and the beast clasped Rhodan with all his legs. “Rrrrrriiiii!”

The pincers clicked dangerously close to his face. Rhodan fell lengthwise. Hopefully Thora would soon come!

“Rrrriiiiiiiiiiiii!”

Four other giant bugs were suddenly there, scraping past him. Others, albeit somewhat smaller, emerged from the shadows.

So this species does not live alone like bears, but in packs like wolves! Rhodan realized their mistake. *But they probably don’t go hunting together...*

“Rrrrriiii!”

Suddenly, something incredibly bright and orange hissed just above Rhodan’s helmet. The helmet display went crazy for a short time and jumped from minus ten degrees Celsius to plus two thousand three hundred.

The pressure on Rhodan’s body eased. He quickly kicked himself free. The body of his opponent, scorched a large area along a jet track, slid to the ground. His suit also had black, charred spots, but the material was so robust that it was not damaged in its functionality.

Rhodan tried to get to his feet, but everywhere was teeming with the whitish bodies, and several times he felt the chewing tools of

one of the animals snapping at him.

“Down, Rhodan!” roared Thora. “They’re in my half of the cave!”

Again, a beam of energy roared through the cave, melting ice. And yet, one of the giant bugs, probably the ancestor of all the animals in this cave in terms of size and mass, threw itself at Rhodan.

“Rrrrriiii!”

The pincers gripped his arm, the feet hammered into the flesh of his legs, and he saw gray-yellow liquid running over the suit.

Crushed like a bug by a bug! he thought. horrified.

At that moment, the animal reared up and wriggled its legs in surprise and helplessness, as if it were being pushed back by an invisible hand. And then that unmistakable shrill voice sounded, which had never sounded sweeter.

“Cute animals!” cried Gucky. He sounded extremely tired.

There were many...so many...and their enemies were out there somewhere. They were not allowed to shoot if they...

Thora fired more bursts of fire.

“Don’t shoot, Thora!” cried Rhodan. “Our enemies could find us!”

Thora continued to shoot. “And if a thousand black Naats were on our heels, the line has been crossed here!”

She fired short, intermittent shots at the giant bugs. The cave filled with steam.

Gucky also used his firearm, but unlike Thora, he tried not to hit the giant bugs. “Come on, hurry, get out of here!”

And then it was over. Nearly a dozen dead bedbug creatures lay scattered on the icy ground; the rest had fled.

“That was...surprising,” Rhodan admitted, knocking snow off his spacesuit.

“We should have assumed that it was not an individual animal,” Thora said grimly. “You are too frivolous, Rhodan. And I let myself be dragged along. This mistake could have cost us our lives.”

Rhodan was silent in dismay. What was her problem?

“Come on, let’s take over this cave,” Gucky suggested. “If my genius and my temperature aren’t deceiving me, it’s warmer here than outside.”

Rhodan carefully pushed the mousebeaver aside. “We should go a little deeper. Here we’re too close to the surface, and I don’t feel very comfortable around beetle corpses.”

“That’s right.” Gucky looked around. He seemed infinitely sad. “I feel the same way.”

Rhodan lit up the cave in search of exits. He found only one. “I’ll go again.”

“But don’t forget your weapon,” said Gucky, his finger raised.

Rhodan grinned. “Make the same mistake twice?”

“You’re only human, Perry Rhodan. You should always keep that in mind.”

The tunnel led into the ice in several curves and turns, but tended to be more at a shallow angle. The ceiling was only about as high as Gucky; the floor was cracked and strewn with pieces of ice, but still smooth, so they had to support themselves against the walls again and again. It was tedious and slow going, and even Gucky apparently rarely felt the need to say anything.

Finally, the tunnel opened into a cave about the height of a man. The headlights of the spacesuits showed three more tunnel openings, but nowhere was a living creature to be seen.

Rhodan stretched; his back hurt. He took off his helmet and

glanced at his suit's measurements. "Gucky was right. The ambient temperature is minus one degree Celsius. We're about eight feet below the surface, if I'm not mistaken."

Thora slid to the ground against a wall of ice. She, too, opened her helmet. "You are not mistaken. Down here we should be relatively safe from discovery for the time being, unless someone has located our gunfire and draws the right conclusions."

"There's something good about this constant snowfall, it's covering our tracks," said Gucky. He pulled back the corners of his mouth, clearly showing his gnawing tooth.

Thora sighed. "A break will do us good. Just rest a little. We're going to need all our strength."

Rhodan blew a cloud of breath into the air, where it instantly turned into a white mist. "Come, Thora. We have to make sure that there is no danger from the other three tunnels. I don't want to be surprised by these ice bugs."

Gucky sneezed indignantly. "I'm sure we'd hear that annoying *rrrriiii* first. And I don't feel anything telepathically."

"Rhodan is right." Thora lifted herself up again. "You stay here, Gucky, and secure the cave. The two of us take the tunnels one after the other." She beckoned Rhodan to the nearest tunnel opening. "Now I'll go ahead. You'll stay a few steps behind so that we don't lose contact with Gucky."

Rhodan watched as she got down on all fours and followed the tunnel. When his headlamp no longer reached her, he crawled after her. Fortunately, the tunnel was short and ended in a very small cave, possibly intended for sleeping or as a nursery for the offspring.

The second corridor was buried after just a few steps, while the third opened into another large cave after only a few meters. Rhodan let his helmet headlight wander through the darkness. There lay and stood along the walls...ice blocks. Strangely shaped blocks of ice, close together, several rows deep, almost like

sculptures roughly carved out of the cold material.

“Thora!” he cried. “Come here! This is what you need to see. Look!.”

Cautiously, he walked on. Behind him, a scratch revealed that Thora was squeezing herself out of the cramped passage. Seconds later, another white-blue beam of light haunted the darkness and tore diffuse contours out of the glowing darkness.

Rhodan walked closer to one of the blocks of ice and froze in surprise. Under a layer of ice a few centimeters thick was the carcass of a shaggy ungulate, well preserved. It had six legs, thick, twisted horns and a wide mouth.

“Rhodan!” he heard Thora’s voice. She sounded alarmed and occupied. “This is some kind of trophy collection or...pantry.”

“That’s my thought,” Rhodan whispered, moving his spotlight to the next object. He went to the next block of ice, then another and another...everywhere the same picture: frozen prey poured into ice. The biodiversity was not great, but surprising. Rhodan would never have expected meter-long earthworms with moray eels and frog legs on this ice world.

“It may be that there is still water deep under the ice, like in a frozen pond,” he said thoughtfully. “We must not forget that Snowman follows a very eccentric orbital track and we are currently in the middle of winter. As the planet flies closer to the suns, the ice is likely to turn back into a liquid state of aggregation. As hostile as this world is right now, it may be particularly species-rich in the summer phases.”

“Maybe Reg has actually gone through the melted ice and is swimming around under our feet right now,” said Gucky pensively, also trudging into the cave. “That would be nice, wouldn’t it?”

Rhodan closed his eyes. He didn’t have the heart to rob the mousebeaver of his hope. And somehow he sensed that the words of the little one were just a façade, that he needed them in order to actually process the death of his brave, red-haired friend.

Reg can't be dead, thought a part of Rhodan, who stubbornly clung to his grief and tore and tugged at it as if he wanted to take it away, but it only intensified in the process. His hope made the wound of Bull's loss fester, not heal, and he had to use all his strength not to think about it. Not to talk about it. God alone wants to know how much his heart overflowed with unspoken words. Words that would not comfort the others, that might even hurt them.

He swallowed hard. "Yes, that would be nice," he said at last, much too late, and turned away.

The glow of his lamp suddenly stuck to red hair. "No!" he cried. "Come here quickly!"

Bull! Good old Bull!

"What..." Thora began, but Gucky was already crowing.

"He's found Reg!"

"Reginald Bull, you devil..." said Rhodan, stepping closer to the ice stele, which was a good two meters high and over a meter in diameter, and clearly had human forms in it. He shone where he had seen the red and brought his face very close to the ice.

No...

Bright blue eyes, a potato-shaped, coarse-pored nose, pale skin and a jumble of red hair all over his face.

"It's not him," said Rhodan, unable to prevent himself from feeling a sharp pain. *How easily our hearts are deceived by hope,* he thought.

Gucky was standing next to him, as was Thora. His two companions now also looked at the stranger who was trapped in the ice: clearly human-like, two meters tall, broad-shouldered, his arms outstretched defensively with fingers bent into claws.

"No, that's not Reginald Bull. But who is it then?"

“None of our crew, anyway,” Thora said firmly. Rhodan didn’t know how knowledgeable she was about every single person on board, but even he couldn’t remember ever seeing this man before.

“If we assume that he probably didn’t grow up here, there is only one halfway plausible possibility: he came from up there.” Gucky gestured towards the ceiling. “From *Ke-Matlon.* Maybe a researcher?”

Rhodan turned searchingly. “Then he may not be alone here! We might even be able to salvage their equipment.”

Thora nodded vigorously. “Excellent idea. Quick, let’s have a look.” She waved her headlight and seemed to be looking for something. The cone of light finally remained on two outlines. “Over there. They could also be humanoids!” She walked quickly to the agreed spot and stopped stiffly. “Oh no!”

Rhodan was immediately alarmed and hurried to her, Gucky close beside him. Under an ice sheet, tightly embraced, stood two people with fear of death in their rigid, blue-pale faces. Two people they knew.

Julian Tifflor and Mildred Orsons.

“Distant planets,” General Pounder had once said during Rhodan’s training after bursting in while the young men were watching old space films of the 20th century, were “phantoms of astronomers that man would never set foot on.”

Pounder had never thought before that there could be worlds like Mongo, Hoth, Volcano, or Dune, let alone that humans would set foot on them while he was still alive.

No, Pounder hadn’t thought of such a thing. But if he had, he would certainly have given the young test pilot, who was eager to become an astronaut and travel to the stars, something to take with him: Even on the strangest of all worlds, an old acquaintance was waiting for everyone who didn’t keep his eyes open: death.

Episode 30: The Wise Ones' Stronghold

By Christian Montillon

1.

Topsid

“Try Trusting a Lizard!”

Finally, thought Eric Manoli. *Finally, I’m not running for my life for once.*

The sounds of fighting were far in the distance behind him and his companions. Only occasionally did the wind waft isolated snippets of strange screams over to the mountainside.

Screams that only lizards could produce.

By now, he’d heard them far too often, and they wouldn’t leave him alone even in his dreams. He was so tired that every single muscle was crying out from exhaustion, and even thinking about closing his eyes would be enough to make him fall asleep where he stood. But what would he dream of? Topsidans? Damaged eyes on a scaled face, staring accusingly and sightlessly into the sky? Everything in him clenched up at the mere thought.

Manoli struggled to breathe. He felt like he was suffocating.

“Look,” said Khatleen-Tarr. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Beautiful? He inhaled deeply. He could breathe, just as he normally could. The air had a fragrant taste, fresher than in the capital. In that sense, at least, things were looking up. Only, as hard as he tried, he couldn’t even begin to figure out what was supposed to be “beautiful”—except for the grand mountainous landscape, maybe, but he had no eyes for that kind of beauty right now. Not as the only human on a planet full of intelligent, upright lizards who were slaughtering each other in a political uprising and wanted to either use him as bait or imprison and kill him.

Khatleen-Tarr turned her head to him. Her slim, scaly tail rose up from the ground and wrapped around her legs. The rasping

sound of her scales rubbing against each other reminded Manoli of sandpaper rubbing against bone-dry wood.

“You hardly ever see one,” the Topsidan continued.

Manoli was confused. “What are you talking about?”

“There! Between the rocks!” Her voice sounded soft. This wasn’t how he knew her at all—the former space soldier, the prostitute, the underground fighter…the closest thing he had to a friend on this world.

Khatleen-Tarr stretched out her arm. The brownish scales gleamed in the sunlight; one had broken off on the back of her hand, and a slightly greasy crust had formed there. Manoli hadn’t noticed it until now; it must have happened during the battle with the hatchlings in the sewers.

He looked in the direction his companion was indicating. A lizard’s head, no larger than a thumbnail, was poking out from behind a jagged boulder on a small gravel field. Its tiny eyes were darting frantically back and forth. A blue tongue, thin as a pencil lead, hung from the half-open mouth. The very next moment, the creature scurried up onto the boulder. It was astoundingly long, at least a meter for sure, and had so many legs splaying out from its sides that it was a shock to the senses. In contrast to its dull, earth-toned body, the tip of its tail glowed bright red.

“Let’s keep going!” Gihl-Khuan urged. He had joined them in the sewers beneath the capital, claiming to be an ordinary man. Supposedly, he’d gotten caught up in the turmoil caused by fighting between insurgents and government troops and fled into Kerh-Onf’s underworld in fear.

Manoli doubted his story. Gihl-Khuan had proven himself a terrifying and, so it seemed to Manoli as a doctor, experienced fighter. If not for Gihl-Khuan, he and Khatleen-Tarr would have fallen victim to the wild hatchlings. They were in his debt.

On the other hand, something about the Topsidan didn’t sit well with the Terran. His manner was too practiced. And why had he

stared so curiously at Kikerren, the flying lizard? The stranger was hiding something. Manoli hoped no bitter disappointment awaited him if he ever found out what it was. For now, he'd have to trust the man. Easier said than done, though.

If he ever made it back to Earth, he'd publish an account of his odyssey on this planet. He already knew the title: *Try Trusting a Lizard!* Simple but effective. It had bestseller potential, not to mention it could be immediately translated into Topsidian. Intergalactic marketing under the guise of fostering cultural understanding—a dream of authors and media corporations alike.

But these musings didn't help him in the here and now. He pushed them away. The time he'd idled away at the bordello called the Purple Nest, passing the days with mundane work and thought exercises like this, was over. Now, he had more important things to focus on.

No one responded to Gihl-Khuan's remark. Khatleen-Tarr remained just as still as Manoli. Even the ever-exuberant Kikerren was sitting on his shoulder as if turned to stone.

"What is it?" the Topsidan man asked gruffly. "Why aren't you coming?" He'd lost some of his artificial politeness toward Khatleen-Tarr and Manoli since leaving the sewers.

Khatleen-Tarr's scales flushed a little darker around her snout. A sign of agitation, even rage, if Manoli was not mistaken. "There's a Topsuann!" she hissed. "Have you ever seen such a fine specimen? Does that really mean nothing to you?"

"I've never cared about those creatures for a moment. And so what if it's the biggest one of all time? What difference does it make?"

"They're our ancestors! That's—"

"A myth," Gihl-Khuan interrupted. "And therefore totally meaningless." He stomped onward, and the graceful creature scurried away and disappeared between the rocks.

Kikerren made angry noises, ascended into the air, and flew after the man. The small animal was dwarfed by the enormous Omzrak mountain range. The huge gray wall seemed to fill the entire world. The snowcapped peaks blended in with the clouds, making it hard to tell where one ended and the other began. Thundering waterfalls echoed from between the distant slopes.

Manoli was actually quite a fan of mountains. He loved them, in fact. For years, he'd intended to finally take a few days' vacation in his cabin in Colorado. His...space adventures had gotten in the way, and now he was stuck on an alien world.

The *Stardust*'s flight to the Moon was supposed to be the high point of its onboard doctor's lifetime. Now he was infinitely farther from home than he could ever have dreamed or imagined. How far exactly, he didn't know. Maybe he'd never find out. How could he? He'd woken up on this planet after a transmitter jump, and he still wasn't entirely clear on how it had all gone down. One way or another, he was in the middle of an altercation between the rebels, called the "cold-bloods," and despot Megh-Takarr—the ruler of Topsid—and his henchmen.

Try Trusting a Lizard! Chapter 3, he thought cynically. *On our way to Sharp-Eyes, the shadowy leader of the rebellion. Part 1: Led by a flying lizard, or: how trustworthy is a brothel owner's pet?* It felt worthy of a laugh, but he was far too weak for that. The heavy 1.3 gravos that he'd been subjected to for weeks was sapping his energy. All his muscles hurt all the time; it was bearable, but too much to ever forget. Every breath stung his lungs, and if he'd looked at himself in the mirror, he'd have seen burst blood vessels in the whites of his eyes.

He heard a loud boom and turned around. Thankfully, the capital city Kerh-Onf was far enough behind them now that they wouldn't feel the shockwave from that explosion. He only saw a distant flicker followed by a towering plume of smoke rising into the sky. The fighting was still raging unabated.

"Doesn't look good," he said.

Khatleen-Tarr didn't even turn around. She was looking around

the rocks where the small creature had disappeared.

“What’s so special about this...” Manoli tried to remember the name.

“The Topsuann?” She sounded amused.

“You said they’re your ancestors.”

“Some believe that Topsidans evolved from the Topsuann lizards. That we originate from them—do you understand?”

Like humans and apes, Manoli thought.

“They say the Star Lizard breathed intelligence and consciousness into them, whereupon they grew. Thus the first Topsidans came to be.”

Okay, not quite *like apes and humans.* Manoli silently smirked to himself. Evidently, each species developed its own theories and beliefs about its origins. It would have been interesting to delve deeper into this topic, but he had more important things on his mind right now. Like surviving the next few hours and days somehow. Not being massacred by soldiers on one side or the other. Or not suffering circulatory collapse due to exhaustion and dying a miserable death here on the plain between the capital and the Omzrak mountains.

“Do you believe that?” he asked. “About the Star Lizard?”

“So what if I do? What difference would it make?”

“Knowing would help me understand you better, Khatleen-Tarr. A lot of...” *Humans,* he’d almost said, but she believed him to be an Arkonide, and it had to stay that way for now. “A lot of my people have a similar belief that a divine being created them. Or at least—”

“Do you believe that?” she interrupted, repeating his own words.

He faltered, unsure of what to say. Kikerren absolved him of the need for an answer. The flying lizard returned to them, cawed softly, and fluttered around his head.

“I think she’s telling us to hurry,” Manoli suggested. “So come on. The Wise Ones’ Stronghold awaits.”

Kikerren was supposed to lead them to the mysterious Sharp-Eyes, leader of the rebel cold-bloods. The owner of the Purple Nest had been part of this rebellion and had given them the flying lizard. With Sharp-Eyes, in the “Wise Ones’ Stronghold” that Gihl-Khuan had mentioned, they should be safe, at least for now. At least, Manoli could only hope. He desperately needed some rest and time to consider his next steps.

The ominous stronghold was doubtless somewhere in the Omzrak mountains. Khatleen-Tarr hadn’t exactly been thrilled when Kikerren first started leading them in this direction. Looking up at the rock massif, Manoli could see why all too well. He could scarcely imagine a more inhospitable environment, and he couldn’t quite believe in an idyllic valley between the individual peaks.

Dark gray clouds were now merging into large formations around those peaks. A forked bolt flashed, silent and dazzling. A moment later, peals of thunder rolled toward them from the steep slopes, refracting into a thousand echoes. While a storm was breaking out up there, Manoli was sweating so hard that his clothes stuck to his body. They’d crossed about half of the plain leading to the mountain range, and every step was a struggle for him. The higher gravity drained his strength, and fear tormented him. He wasn’t a born hero, even if circumstance was forcing him down that path. In his mind, accompanying the Moon mission in a medical capacity had been the height of adventure. Sometimes he cursed the fact that he’d happened to be there when the Arkonide ship was found. Then again, he told himself, there could be nothing more incredible than experiencing the genesis of a new era so up close and personal. This was a chance to shape the future, free of the menace of war and hostility that divided Earth’s nations.

The thought stung, as it again reminded him just how far he was from home. In the days and weeks at the bordello, he’d had a lot of time to think. More than once, he’d wistfully asked himself one of the most famous questions of all time: what if?

What if he hadn’t experienced all this? What if he were sitting

comfortably at home, watching a movie with a beer in his hand?

What if, right at this very moment, he could fulfill his old wish of spending a night in a deep-sea hotel for rich eccentrics? *And hey, who cares if I blow an entire year's savings on it?*

What if it had all gone differently on the Moon because Perry Rhodan had failed—if he'd simply died in the crash landing or suffocated on the surface? *Rest in peace, Eric Manoli; a few media reports, some crocodile tears, true regret only among a few, and then the world would keep turning without me, just like it did before I was born.*

He looked at the walking lizard beside him, observing the path her tail left in the dust as she dragged it behind her. No, he wouldn't change anything in the world, no matter how badly it was going for him.

"I am Eric Manoli," he whispered, speaking so quietly that even Khatleen-Tarr couldn't hear him, "and this is my new life."

Kikerren squawked.

The lone, lost human stubbornly trudged onward, each step taking him closer to the mountains, the Wise Ones' Stronghold, and his future.

"Erikk-Mahnoli?"

Manoli turned to Gihl-Khuan, who had softly yet distinctly called his name. "Yes?"

"Why do you trust me?"

Because I have no other choice. Manoli would have loved to have known more about their enigmatic companion. Was he just a harmless man, albeit an odd one who'd been speaking to a broken armband? Or was there more to him?

"Circumstances brought us together."

"Is that an Arkonide saying? We're Topsidans, and you're an

Arkonide. Normally, you'd be looking down on us with derision, unbearably arrogant like the rest of your species."

Manoli recalled what had been running through his mind just moments earlier. *Normally, I'd be working a ten-hour shift, taking a nap, or maybe enjoying some good grub. With a lady, if I'm lucky.* His gaze reflexively wandered to Khatleen-Tarr. *A human lady.*

"Leave him alone!" Khatleen-Tarr demanded. "Erikk's no ordinary Arkonide."

"Because the very circumstances he just mentioned force him not to be! If he were sitting in a starship with his finger on the controls —"

"You're wrong!" she interrupted.

Manoli flinched in shock as Kikerren landed on his shoulder from behind. He had to get rid of this stupid jumpiness! But how, when exhaustion and exertion were leaching his body and soul more and more?

"I've learned to see your people with very different eyes. You Topsidans helped me survive after I woke up on your world. Khatleen, for example. And her boss. They—"

"Her boss," Gihl-Khuan sneered. His tongue darted in and out of his mouth. "A brothel keeper."

"A decent man! He was trying to do the right thing, in his own way. Without him and his help, I doubt I'd have survived a single day in the city's ghetto."

"He's one of the cold-bloods," said Gihl-Khuan, again exhibiting that he knew more than he had initially implied. "The rebels who hold the view that Topsidans shouldn't rely too much on military expansion. That military strength is a false promise of safety."

"Where are you going with this?" asked Khatleen-Tarr.

"I'm highlighting that he represents his convictions with violence and fights the despot with the same military means his enemy

uses."

"Despite your criticism, you joined up with us," said Manoli, "and you're looking for the Wise Ones' Stronghold to find refuge there with Sharp-Eyes."

"Which brings me back to my original question." Gihl-Khuan blinked several times, the nictitating membranes snapping shut. "Why do you trust me?"

"You had no other option but to join us," Khatleen-Tarr asserted. "And you wouldn't step on your only companions' tails from behind. You'd be all alone with us."

In his mind, Manoli even went a step further, though he didn't speak his reasoning aloud. His read was that Gihl-Khuan was just as traumatized by war and fighting as Khatleen, who had seen and done terrible things as a space soldier—a confused soul seeking stability and healing. Gihl-Khuan was hoping for more from the Wise Ones' Stronghold than a temporary refuge. The way the former hunter looked at the small, green, shimmering flying lizard made that abundantly clear.

During their march across the plain together, the man had told him a little about his life. He'd been told that his homeworld was destroyed—but Kikerren's species had been native to that planet, and the flying lizard clearly originated from there. Since then, Gihl-Khuan had harbored a glimmer of hope that his home planet still existed after all. That he'd been lied to.

Manoli wondered what feelings must have been raging in the Topsidan man...and whether he could even assess them. The Topsidian mentality differed in many respects from humans' way of thinking. Sure, Manoli had gained some insight over the past few weeks, but he wasn't even close to *really* understanding these beings.

They strode onward, silent and grimly determined. The sounds of battle in the capital grew ever fainter, swallowed up by the droning thunder that echoed between the Omzrak peaks, and by the rushing of a small river they were approaching. It ran almost dead straight

across the plain from the mountain, in a deeply sunken bed. From a distance, Manoli estimated that the water had to be at least two meters down; left and right were bordered by a steep slope.

Every so often, Manoli looked over his shoulder, afraid that he'd see a horde of angry Topsidans behind them.

"What are you expecting to see, Erikk-Mahnoli?" Gihl-Khuan sneered. "What are you so scared of?"

"Scared is the wrong word," he said.

"But you are afraid of something."

"Well, isn't it likely that other rebels will be fleeing the city just like us? And that the despot's troops will be following them? That the battle will come out here, in other words?"

Gihl-Khuan disagreed. "We've on the surface, a long way outside the city. Beyond the border with Beelkar. The soldiers wouldn't dare accost us."

"Oh, really?" Manoli asked, peevish. "And what makes you so sure?" *What are you hiding from us?*

Gihl-Khuan was about to reply again but was silenced by a loud animal cry.

Khatleen-Tarr whipped her head around. "It's coming from the river!" She started running, her upper body tilted slightly forward. Manoli and Gihl-Khuan exchanged a brief glance and followed her.

Suddenly, above the riverbed slope, a slim, squat body appeared, then immediately vanished into the water. Manoli caught a glimpse of reddish-brown fur. A predator's roar echoed across the plain before being replaced by far quieter pathetic whimpering.

Khatleen-Tarr reached the river seconds before Manoli and Gihl-Khuan. She jumped over the edge. Manoli saw fountains splash up around her, then he reached the slope himself and looked down, stunned. The sun's rays gleamed on the water, and half-rainbows stretched across some of the stones in the river. But he only vaguely

registered that. Altogether, five of the reddish-brown creatures were attacking a nest that held a dozen large, pale gray eggs. From a broken egg, a tiny creature emerged, its scaled skin smeared with a clear, slimy substance.

Khatleen-Tarr stormed towards the predators in a rage. One of them sank its teeth into the small whatever-it-was, which hadn't even fully left the protective shell of its egg.

Gihl-Khuan swore. "Hatchlings!"

2.

Aboard the Nesbitt-Breck

Billiard Balls and True Adventure

It was January 22, 2037, and Venus was emerging out of the blackness of space.

Earth's neighboring planet looked like a billiard ball made of ivory, with brownish stains forming a pattern that created a pretense of continents.

Homer G. Adams knew this sight. By sheer coincidence, he'd seen it once before, on a billiard ball. In a pub in Brixton, on a rainy day in March, 1981, before his accident, when he'd still dreamed of a career as a professional soccer player. He'd spent the afternoon playing billiards with his best friend, David Kincaide, who had raved about becoming a pilot one day, but would be left lying dead on the pavement of that same part of London just one month later in the clashes with police—the 1981 Brixton riot.

More than fifty years had passed since then, but Adams could have described every detail of the afternoon when he'd seen David for the last time. He still knew the name of the woman behind the bar—Jane Hughes—and the pattern on the carpet: a stylized wrought iron garden fence. He remembered the trivial topic he and the pub's other guests had discussed. Would Crystal Palace manage to stay in the Premier League? That had been the big question on their minds.

That moment still lived inside Adams. It was real—as real as the here and now. And just as real as the fact that David had never married the young woman he'd been so in love with, whom he talked about all the time. Adams had lost touch with Andrea after the funeral. Was she still alive? It was so long ago, half a lifetime or more.

With some effort, he turned his gaze away from the lifelike holo

that hazily depicted Venus. There were more important things than the past. He looked around. A dozen men and women were serving on the bridge of the *Nesbitt-Breck*, the Topsidan recon craft that Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bull had salvaged on the hellish planet Gol. Alongside the proud *Tosoma*, which had set out for Arkon, this small ship now represented the Terran Union's only spacecraft that really deserved its title in this new era.

Not exactly what you'd call a mighty fleet, Adams thought sarcastically.

And he, the hunchback with a limp, the former athlete, traitor, and ultimately richest man on Earth, was the Terran Union's administrator. He bore responsibility for the entire population of Earth and faced a decision that was keeping him up at night.

Nothing was as simple as it had been back then, in the pub.

No one on board, with one exception, suspected anything about this decision. The men and women were poring over their various workstations on the bridge. Most were standing up, merely leaning against the strangely shaped seats. Though they were appropriate for standing lizards, they were highly uncomfortable for humans—if you even dared to sit on one. Adams had tried it once and then told his team that his "old bones weren't made for that."

Everyone was going about their duties, occasionally joking among themselves with a casual air that reminded him of the pub all that time ago. For these young people who could be his children —no, his grandchildren—traveling to alien worlds was fast becoming a part of the everyday. The primitive past in which Homer G. Adams had spent almost his entire life, and which was barely half a year behind him, was a distant time period for them—faded, forgotten.

Not for him. Because he never forgot. A blessing and a curse all at once.

Behind him, someone said, "Lost in your thoughts again, old man?"

Adams turned at a measured pace befitting of an old, hunched man, and replied, “I might have known it was you.”

Conrad Deringhouse, commander of the *Nesbitt-Breck*, laughed amiably. He found it fun to call Adams an “old man” now and again, without meaning it pejoratively in the slightest. The former astronaut was in his mid-twenties but could be mistaken for a teenager if you didn’t know better. Deringhouse was tall and lanky, and usually had his unfittingly large hands in his pockets. The carefree air about him suggested he was yet to have a taste of the horrors of life.

But appearances could be deceiving. The scar running diagonally across his neck was proof of this, as were the files Adams had read in their entirety, down to the last footnote. Deringhouse had been injured in the *Good Hope*’s crash on Ferrol, part of humanity’s first venture to another solar system. An explosion had driven a shard deep into his throat; he would have bled to death without his crewmates’ help—and the aid of a lizard in possession of a degree of courage and compassion that would put most humans to shame.

“Attention, all passengers!” said Deringhouse, shifting his tone. “We will soon be entering Venus’s atmosphere. I ask you all to put out your cigarettes and fasten your seatbelts.”

“I’ll do my best.” Adams leaned against the Topsidian chair without actually settling into the curved seating area. Belts came out automatically and secured him to the frame. From experience, he’d gotten smart enough to shift his own weight at the last minute so that he wasn’t pushed into the opening meant for the Topsidans’ tails, about which quite a few crew members had already made obscene jokes. Adams wondered in passing how many of these young people still knew the true meaning of the word “stool.”

The *Nesbitt-Breck* began to enter the planet’s atmosphere. Not a hint of vibration was felt on the bridge. In the brave new world that had dawned since they’d made contact with the Arkonides, space flights were silent and effortless.

But Adams knew that this was only an elaborate deception. If the inertial dampers went offline, it was beyond doubtful whether the

seatbelts could keep the crew in place. The *Nesbitt-Breck* was entering the atmosphere at extremely high speed, and the turbulence of the dense gas layer was even stronger. The recon craft was being thrown about with force that would have cracked the *Stardust* like a nutshell on its trip to Earth's moon.

Deringhouse, who was also in his workstation's grasp, took over piloting duties himself. This effort was unnecessary, maybe even risky, but the former astronaut wouldn't have left control of the ship to the Positronic and missed out on that adrenaline rush for all the money in the world.

The boy craves true adventure, Adams thought. To him, the young man came across like a surfer balancing on his board. Deringhouse shifted his weight; the flexible belt allowed him that mobility.

The administrator couldn't help thinking of Julian Tifflor and Mildren Orsons. Some months ago, they pair had helped him spark the curiosity of a Fantan called Sheperk. He saw them as friends. Were they also friends with Deringhouse? It seemed obvious enough; they shared the same rambunctious lust for adventure. Adams would have liked to see that. Julian and Mildred were still mourning Timothy Harnahan, who had merged into the mysterious mind entity called Harno and had thus irrevocably chosen an existence among the stars.

Adams had offered the pair leading positions in the space academy the Terran Union was establishing at the former Russian space center Baikonur. But Julian and Mildred had turned it down and set off for Arkon in the *Tosoma* with Perry Rhodan. The siren call of the stars had been stronger. Adams understood that all too well. Were he fifty years younger, he'd have done the same thing. Nothing could have kept him from heading out into the great unknown.

Deringhouse decelerated and pushed the *Nesbitt-Breck* deeper. A hologram showed Venus the way plain human eyes would see it: covered in clouds even thicker than the infamous fog that sometimes settled over London. The vapor over Venus was made up almost entirely of carbon dioxide. Accompanying that were nitrogen, a pinch of sulfur dioxide, and argon, as well as traces of

other gasses. A human without a space suit would suffocate at once.

The holo gave no indication of this danger. Adams felt like he was in one of those newfangled special cinemas, where the rebooted James Bond was currently saving the world as irrepressibly as ever and viewers could tangibly experience the volcanic heat and raining shards of glass along with him.

On the periphery of his awareness, Adams had happened to catch the torrent of news reports; alongside harmless injuries that every visitor acknowledged the risk of with a fingerprint at the entrance, there had been one death.

No, he corrected himself in his mind. It wasn't like one of those cinemas. Similar, yes, but incomparably safer. At least, along as the Topsidian technology held up.

For several long minutes, the recon craft worked its way through the thick clouds. The ship descended at a shallow angle. Then, all of a sudden, the *Nesbitt-Breck* broke free of the clouds, and they had an uninterrupted view into the distance so clear that it looked like an optical illusion despite the dim light on account of the cloud canopy. Smoke plumes rose up from the planet's bleak, lifeless surface and quickly dispersed in the wind. Sparks flashed on the ground, blazing white and flickering green. These came from heavy Arkonide cannons that had once served to fend off attackers from space. Now the mobile batteries' barrels were aimed downwards.

Deringhouse pushed the craft into a loop, reducing its speed to that of a glider and letting it continue descending at a snail's space. He grinned with satisfaction.

The cannons—Adams counted about forty of them—were liquefying and vaporizing the soil and forming an enormous crater in Venus's crust. In the middle of this pit, a structure came into view that was too regular to be of natural origin. The administrator saw a huge steel disc slowly rotating. Beneath it, something was glowing. Adams thought he could see other movement too.

The Venus refuge. That was the name humans had given it. The Arkonides had built it ten thousand years ago. They'd called the

enormous building Zarakh'khazil, meaning "dark crater." It had been meant as a hiding place and refuge for settlers who had made their home on the third planet in the solar system: Earth. But, as humans knew by now, that Arkonide colony had been destroyed in an attack by the Methanes. The continent of Atlantis had sunk into the sea, and only legends had been left of it.

Not one Arkonide had actually found refuge in Zarakh'khazil; no one had reached this secure fortress. The tremendous effort the settlers had gone to had been in vain.

At least, it had appeared so until recently. Now the picture had fundamentally changed. New opportunities presented themselves in unexpected ways. And Administrator Homer G. Adams was the man who had to decide if humanity would seize them.

"Are you okay?" Deringhouse asked, concerned, but without neglecting the controls. "You look pale."

"Do I?" *Well observed, boy.* Adams instinctively raised a hand and wiped his forehead. He felt wetness on his fingers. Sweat. "The evacuation of the crew is complete?"

Deringhouse confirmed. "The last members of the science team left the refuge three hours ago. Their shuttle is in orbit around Venus. We'll take them on board on the way back."

The *Nesbitt-Breck* lost all its remaining speed and floated above the Arkonide refuge. From this vantage point, the structure's design was clearly visible. Zarakh'khazil consisted of ten steel discs in total. Each of them had a thickness of about two hundred meters and a diameter of more than twice that. These discs were piled on top of each other, albeit slightly offset from one another, and rotated continually. Scientists had explained that the design was to account for Venus's low crust stability. Earthquakes could liquidize the crust through the frictional heat they unleashed. In that situation, each disc could autonomously rotate— in sync with the others—and give the refuge uplift so that it didn't sink. Now that half of the entire structure was exposed, the rotation kept it from tipping over.

A large rectangle opened up on the roof of the uppermost section. Deringhouse set the Nesbitt-Breck moving slowly, its speed aligned with the disc's. Then he lowered the ship towards the opening. Gently, the Topsidan recon craft touched down. The hangar entrance closed.

The seatbelts released Adams. Finally.

"It won't take long," the administrator told Deringhouse. "I'll be back in an hour."

"Wouldn't it be better for me to go with you?" The young man's voice sounded uncommonly serious.

"Thanks! That won't be necessary." Difficult decisions were waiting for Homer G. Adams, and he was inclined to think not of safety, but of the fantastic opportunities that courage and daring could bring to light.

He made his way into the refuge.

3.

Topsid

Those Things You Never Think About

Hatchlings.

The mere thought horrified Manoli. This wasn't the capital's murky underworld. He gave himself a jolt and ran down the slope to follow Khatleen-Tarr and Gihl-Khuan, landing in the river with a splash just like them. The water was ice cold and felt like it could tear through him all the way to the bone and peel off his flesh.

Khatleen-Tarr snarled at the reddish-brown predators. Her tail rose up and slapped the water in front of one of the beasts, sending a wave splashing over it. The animal roared and bared its teeth. The dripping wet fur on its bulging snout bristled.

"Off with you!" Gihl-Khuan grabbed a rock almost the size of Manoli's head and hurled it straight at one of the predators, catching it squarely on the side with an ugly crack. The creature tumbled over with a yelp and splashed into the water, disappearing under. Beating with all four legs, it emerged again and went into a line with the others of its species. The water around it turned red; the beast was panting hard, and its right hind leg buckled a few times.

Manoli lifted up a rock too. The idea of fighting these beasts made him quite uneasy, but he knew exactly why his two companions were taking such drastic action.

The nest of Topsidan eggs lay beside the river, in a hollow etched deep into the riverbed slope. There, it had remained safe, only to now be discovered by the predators, either by pure coincidence or because, in the truest sense of the word, the eggs had come to life—or rather, life had come out of them. A few moments earlier, one young had hatched, and a few other eggs were starting to shake...

The small pack of animals went into an attack formation, their mouths stretching out to reveal their bared teeth to their three assailants. They were arrayed around the nest, clearly reluctant to be separated from their valuable and—Manoli shuddered—likely *delicious* prey too easily. On all fours, they reached at least as high as Manoli's chest, and claws jutted from each paw and bored deep into the ground. One swipe of those could doubtless tear horrendous wounds.

The tiny, freshly hatched lizard hung dead from the largest beast's mouth. It fell now, and the creature scraped the corpse behind it with a paw. Manoli felt nausea rising in him; he was conscious that the prey had been no mere animal, but an intelligent being, alien though it looked. A young Topsidan...

"What do we do?" he asked. Kikerren was fluttering on his shoulder with agitation, one wing brushing against his neck.

"I'll handle it," Gihl-Khuan said, resolved. "You two stay back!"

"But—" Khatleen-Tarr began.

"Quiet!" the man barked at her, jumping forward. He span, moving as quick as lightning. His fist smashed against the skull of the animal that had killed the infant lizard. A pitiful whine followed—and at the same moment, the others took the lead.

In a flash, Gihl-Khuan avoided a leaping animal. But he went beyond that, slamming an arm against the back of its head. In the same motion, his lizard tail whipped through the air and smacked one predator's unprotected throat. Something cracked. Whimpering softly, the predator rolled over backwards, crashed into the water, and lay there, motionless.

Manoli could hardly follow the rapid movements with his eyes. Gihl-Khuan was certainly no ordinary Topsidan.

The uninjured beasts let out a kind of barking sound and dove behind the nest. They clustered together and ran away, leaving their dead packmate floating in the river. They didn't look back, yelping as they escaped. The beast with the injured flank limped

along, leaving a trail of blood in its wake.

Gihl-Khuan hadn't taken a single scratch. He bent down over the nest and watched, not moving, as another eggshell began to split. Shadowed movement was just visible behind the shell. It cracked and broke. A little arm reached out of the egg. Clear mucus dripped from the tiny fingertips. The upper half of the egg folded aside, and a whining sound escaped from the baby lizard's snout as the new Topsidan awkwardly clambered out of the nest and into the world. Its arms wiped its sticky eyes, rubbing them clean. A small tongue swung out of its mouth, licking its hand.

Instinctively, Manoli moved to go to the tiny being and help it.

"Leave it!" Khatleen-Tarr urged. "It's on its own."

With quite some effort, Manoli held himself back. He found it a struggle to watch and do nothing. "We take care of our newborns," he explained.

"Parental care may be different among Arkonides," said the former soldier and prostitute, "but hatchlings don't need any...what do you call it?"

"Warmth?" he suggested. "Affection?"

"Factors that may be important for your young," Gihl-Khuan interjected. "Don't be so arrogant as to impose them on ours. You Arkonides aren't the measuring stick for all things in the universe."

"But you saved the eggs! Clearly, you think they're—"

"If they can manage it, the little ones will go into the underground sewers and survive down there. In the future, a few of them might step out into the light again and be worthy of living as real Topsidans."

Manoli nodded. *I'm not at home,* he told himself, as he had countless times by now. *They don't think like me. They're aliens, even if they have similar feelings in some situations.* Even Khatleen-Tarr wasn't like him. Not remotely.

Eric Manoli felt terribly alone—even more so than before.

He lay on his back on the slope in the natural shadow of the riverbed. The sun was sinking towards the horizon, and Manoli was actually relatively comfortable, since he'd cleared a few stones aside and was lying on a kind of grass. The tufts felt soft, almost like moss, and to his relief, they weren't wet from the river water rushing along not far below his feet.

Kikerren was dozing next to him on an eroded rock. Evidently, the waterline was higher at other times of the year and washed over this part of the slope. Only occasionally did the flying lizard make a croaking sound; it pointed towards the mountain range, as if trying to say, *Come on, we have to hurry! Sharp-Eyes and the Wise Ones' Stronghold are waiting for us!*

They'd been resting by the nest for hours. Though Manoli had protested at first, his two companions insisted on staying there and protecting it until all the hatchlings had emerged from their eggs.

Only three eggs were still intact. The other lizard offspring were mostly lying still in the nest, lapping the clear nutritional mucus from each other's bodies and occasionally munching on pieces of eggshell.

"They're building up energy for their first journey." It was Khatleen-Tarr's voice.

Manoli turned his head. The Topsidan woman sat down next to him. Kikerren stood up, flapped her wings twice, and landed on Khatleen-Tarr's shoulder. She sharpened her tiny claws on the woman's neck scales. It didn't bother the Topsidan. Maybe she even liked it.

"How do the eggs get out here in the first place?" Manoli asked. "Is it...normal for them to lie here abandoned? I have to admit I've never thought about it. I mean, about your children and the..." He started stammering more and more.

"The egg laying?"

He nodded. “You know, Khatleen-Tarr, that topic’s been like a taboo for me. No, that’s not quite it. It just never occurred to me. Not even when we were attacked by ravenous hatchlings in the sewers.”

“Topsid is facing an overpopulation crisis,” she explained. “We’ve developed mechanisms to enable natural selection. The weak don’t survive. But to answer your question, Erikk-Mahnoli—no, wild nests like this aren’t the rule. They’re forbidden and hence rare.”

“So you assume.”

“What do you mean?”

“There might be thousands of them on this plain or on the other side of the city. Could be that most of them are ransacked by these predators and your authorities never find out about them.”

He shivered thinking about it, just as Khatleen-Tarr’s casual mention of “natural selection” had made a shiver run down his spine. Naturally, he knew this concept from Earth too—but it applied to the countless species in the wild. Not to humans. Not intelligent life.

Manoli found it barbaric, he reminded himself that he had to adjust his way of thinking. He needed to adjust to their alien mentality. “Can I ask you something?”

She made an amused hissing sound. “Ask away, Erikk! We’re way past the stage of not being fully open with each other. You watched me go about my…work at the Purple Nest and saved me from a violent john.”

He waved a dismissive hand, grinning. “Not as bad as when I trotted along by your side as a dumb Rrakass!” When he recalled how he’d walked through the city streets clothed in stinking animal fur to disguise himself, he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. It had driven him insane and come awfully close to ending in his death.

“So,” she urged, “your question!”

“Those little hatchlings grow into the vermin that almost mauled us to death in the sewers. But here, by the nest, you two are filled with awe and reverence.”

“And that surprises you?”

“I’m just trying to understand you better.”

“Is there a dictator on your world? A mass murderer? Someone who killed millions? Who deserved death many times over?”

A few names came to Manoli’s mind straight away. *Far too many names.* “Yes,” he said in a flat voice.

“Now imagine you could travel back in time and see those murderers lying before you. Freshly hatched.”

“Born,” he corrected reflexively.

She ignored it. “What would you do? Would you take a knife and cut those hatchlings to pieces?”

Yes, he wanted to say at first, because that felt like the obvious answer. But it wasn’t. He tried to picture this situation, and ice-cold dread seized him.

“Maybe now you understand us a little better, Erikk,” she said, putting a hand on his right shoulder.

He almost felt comforted by it. It was almost…human warmth.

Another eggshell cracked, and the first small fissures in the shell formed branching lines until a tiny, pitifully squeaking lizard snout burst out.

Another Topsidan tunneled its way into life in the few next minutes, alone and without help. It had proven itself for the first time, and this time Eric Manoli felt like he understood what he was seeing not only with his mind, but also with his heart, at least to some extent.

It took until the next morning, after a few hours of all-too-uneasy sleep, for the final lizard to hatch.

“Our task is done,” Gihl-Khuan stated. “Let’s keep going.”

“But they’re just as helpless as before,” said Manoli.

“They’ve all hatched now,” Khatleen-Tarr explained. “Each member of a clutch waits for all the others. Now they’ll begin their journey.”

Indeed, the tiny creatures started moving. Somewhat clumsily, they clambered out of the nest and waddled toward the water.

“Is it an instinct?” Manoli asked.

“They’re not animals,” Gihl-Khuan clarified brusquely. “Just children. They can already think, and they know what they have to do. They have to survive.”

One after another, they splashed into the water and floated with the river. They rapidly swam onward, toward the city and thus the underworld in which their fight for survival would enter its next stage. This time, there would be no one to help and support them.

But they didn’t get far. While Manoli, Khatleen-Tarr, and Gihl-Khuan were still getting ready to continue their trek to the mountains, the predators’ barking and bellowing resounded again. From a hidden hollow or alcove in the riverbed slope, they pounced on the small Topsidans. This was only a hundred meters away at most. Manoli could make out every detail.

A chill ran through him, and he was about to start running—but Khatleen-Tarr grabbed him by the shoulder. “Stay here!”

A tortured lizard scream sounded, then cut off abruptly.

“But—”

“No ‘but,’ Erikk-Mahnoli!” Gihl-Khuan shouted at him.

“We have to help them!”

“We don’t have to do anything,” Khatleen-Tarr said softly.

“But…how can you let this happen?”

The predators fished one hatchling after another out of the water and fed on their prey.

“How can you let this happen?” Manoli repeated, toneless.

“It’s the way of the world. Do you really not comprehend that?” Gihl-Khuan looked at him with an unyielding stare. His nictitating membranes snapped closed and opened again several times. Each time, Manoli felt more like he was being dissected.

“No,” he managed to say with some effort. “I understand. They weren’t worthy.”

“They let themselves be carried by the current and succumbed to the first danger along the way.” Khatleen-Tarr’s voice sounded soft. It held neither contempt nor sympathy. More like…sadness. But Manoli wasn’t sure if he was just imagining it. *Wanted* to imagine it.

They continued their march towards the mountains.

4.

Venus

Conversation with a Machine

In the hangar inside the Venus refuge, an Arkonide was waiting for Homer G. Adams—a holographic illusion, as was clear to him in an instant.

The man, whose long white hair, red eyes, and dignified aura of age were faintly reminiscent of Crest, bowed before him and silently led him into the station. The hunched administrator followed, even if it wasn't obvious to him why he needed to be taken to any particular place.

Arkonide technology came across like pure magic to him. He didn't understand it, and he was convinced that the host of young engineers understood it no better, even though they devised one clever term for it after another and fed each one into the data network.

But Adams was happy to leave the hangar. For the next few minutes, he wanted to be unobserved.

The refuge was empty and uncomfortably cold inside. There was no sign of all the ardently enthusiastic—and increasingly disillusioned—scientists or the multitudes of robots that had been working everywhere in the facility during his last visit. The refuge's Positronic must have withdrawn them.

The air tasted a little stale, although the artificial atmosphere was continually replacing it. Adams listened to his echoing footsteps. It was mixed with a distant grinding sound that he decided was the result of friction between the turning discs and the planet's surface. Nonetheless, it sounded...threatening.

You have nothing to fear! he told himself. *And don't take yourself so seriously! This isn't about you!*

All the clever thoughts didn't help. Trepidation rose up in him, slowly choking him. The alienness of this place intimidated him. This refuge had been built long ago by beings who superficially looked astonishingly like humans, yet belonged to an alien culture. The Arkonides followed their own values and beliefs, and he was convinced they still held a few surprises for humanity—and not all of them would be pleasant.

Adams's silent guide brought him to an anti-grav shaft. The hologram didn't make the slightest sound. It didn't breathe, had no mass, was not really there. The administrator pulled himself together and consigned himself to the invisible gravity field. He floated downward.

After a distance that he estimated was about half the refuge's thickness, his guide left the shaft and pointed him to a door. The hologram bowed and then disappeared into thin air as if a gust of wind had dispersed it. For the briefest instant, Adams thought he could still see a spark in the air, then it was gone.

He stepped through the door and stopped in surprise. He had expected a conference room or something similar, but instead he was looking at a lush garden. None of the flora was from Earth. He had visited every corner of the world in the course of his life, and his infallible memory hadn't forgotten the shape of a single plant. He couldn't have forgotten even if he'd wanted to. The greenery stretching out before him as if on a planet's surface was pale, like it had been bleached by a sun far stronger than Earth's.

Was this a sample of Arkon, the Arkonides' home? Was he essentially catching a glimpse of a different, far-distant world? And also into the past, since—if his suspicion was accurate—it would have looked like this on Arkon ten thousand years ago when this station was built.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Administrator."

The voice came from everywhere all at once; it couldn't be placed. It spoke English, and perfectly. British English with no discernible regional flavor. Adams recognized it from his first visit to the Venus refuge three weeks earlier. As it had then, it unnerved

him. He disliked not seeing a real being.

Since he never forgot a thing, even the timbre of a voice, he had grown used to making use of that gift to size up his conversation partners. Over the decades, Adams had met thousands of people. The first time he heard someone, he always reached back into the archives of his memory and found similarities with others he'd met before—and experience had taught him that a similarity of voice went hand in hand with a similarity of character. It couldn't be scientifically proven, but he didn't give a damn about that; his experience was worth more to him than any experiment, no matter how clever the people conducting it.

They say the eyes are the window to the soul. For Homer G. Adams, it was not the eyes, but the voice that gave him insight and told him who he was dealing with. Only, this Positronic's voice wasn't...real. It belonged not to a living being, but an artificial intelligence that, at best, was only pretending to be a person.

It spoke again. "You requested time to think, Administrator. Have you come to a decision?"

Adams let the voice echo in his mind several times, but it revealed nothing. *What are you expecting, Homer?* he admonished himself. *It's a machine. It doesn't have a soul!*

"I still have questions," he said.

"Ask them!"

"During my last visit, you informed me that some code had activated in you. You asserted that it would be for humanity's benefit."

"That's correct," the Positronic replied.

"This code must have been put in place ten thousand years ago. At that time, humans were still primitive savages."

"That negative evaluation is not appropriate. The cultural status of your species was merely a momentary snapshot. I am capable of extrapolating the current status."

Adams suppressed a sarcastic remark. Clearly, Arkonide machines knew a concept that was alien even to its builders: political correctness. Thora da Zoltral had greeted humans with unconcealed arrogance. To her, Rhodan and his crew had been little better than animals. But that had changed. By now, Adams thought smugly, the Arkonide captain might have actually taken a liking to "these animals," as they had to her.

"The situation has fundamentally changed," the Positronic continued. "Humanity is poised to head out to the stars. My programming has hence determined that I help you with that."

"You're too kind. But why now? You've had ten thousand years."

"The decision was not mine. I am only following my programming. Did I not mention that?"

"Of course you did, and you know that!"

"I'm merely trying to communicate on your level, human. If I have adopted an incorrect rhetorical device, I hereby ask your forgiveness."

Adams didn't respond to that. He hadn't come here to learn how well a Positronic could mimic human psychology. "Who programmed you?"

"I am not authorized to share that information."

"It was Rico, wasn't it?" The robot, whose origins remained unclear, had resided at the refuge for a long time.

"I am not authorized to share that information," the Positronic repeated in exactly the same tone. *Almost* exactly, rather. Adams thought he could discern a slight nuance. Or was he only imagining the taunting undertone?

If Rico really had programmed this code, it meant a machine had given instructions to another machine. A confusing notion. And at whose behest had Rico acted, then? Or was the robot making his own decisions?

The administrator started to feel faint. The longer he thought about it, the clearer it was that he was staring into an abyss beyond his power of imagination.

“Was it the commander of the colony on Earth?” Adams asked as his next question.

He received the answer he had expected: “I am not authorized to __”

“Atlan,” he interrupted. “It was Atlan da Gonozal.”

“How do you know his name?”

A concession. But only a tiny one. This computer had confirmed what Crest da Zoltral, Tatiana Michalovna, and Trker-Hon had found out. On their search for the Planet of Eternal Life, the trio had been sent ten thousand years into the past, where they had just barely survived the Atlantis colony’s downfall. In the process, they had learned the commander’s name, though they hadn’t encountered him personally. Adams would have loved to have known what kind of man this Atlan was. But on the other hand...what was the point of thinking so much about a corpse? Atlan had been dead for ten thousand years. Nothing was left of him but a distant memory of his name.

“Oh, you know,” Adams said, “my earlier lack of knowledge was only a momentary snapshot.” He was enjoying the role reversal. For months, the scientists had been trying to get information out of the Positronic. All in vain. Its storage had largely been wiped and had revealed nothing. “What goal was Atlan da Gonozal pursuing when he programmed this command into you?”

“The goal of this code is to help humanity.” The Positronic didn’t contradict his supposition that Atlan had done it. Did that mean that his assumption was correct? Or did the machine’s logic dictate that a direct denial was not necessary?

He couldn’t rely on this inference, as obvious as it seemed. “Really?” he asked. “Why did you shoot down the reconnaissance craft with Thora da Zoltral and Tamika on board if you wanted to

help humanity?" Adams was hinting at an incident that had happened mere days after Perry Rhodan had made first contact with the Arkonides on Earth's Moon.

"Firstly, the people concerned were Arkonides, not humans," the Positronic corrected him. "As such, your accusation is devoid of all logic. Secondly, at that point in time, Thora da Zoltral had a largely negative attitude towards humanity. Her later change of heart could not be foreseen. I may calculate probabilities, but I am not a prophet. In the context of the time, I had to assume hostile intentions. That decision quickly proved false. I have long since corrected for it as far as I was able."

"Tamika is dead. Your robots killed her."

"That's correct," the voice said without regret. How *could* it regret? It wasn't capable of such feelings.

"So you make mistakes," Adams determined. "Irreparable mistakes, even, with living individuals' deaths as a consequence. Why should I trust you in this matter?"

"Because it corresponds to reason. I have existed for ten thousand years of your time. It would have been trivial for me to destroy your entire species at any time. The *Tosoma* auxiliary craft, which was under my control, would have been sufficient for that. And yet, I did nothing to humanity. Why should I do it now? Why in such a complicated, roundabout way? A human like you might think that way, but it wouldn't be logical. Quite the contrary. And I don't work as efficiently as one with your biological brains."

The Positronic was expressing exactly the same thought process that the administrator had gone through over and over. He couldn't imagine any reason why it would want to cause humanity harm. At the same time, so much hung in the balance...

For a while, both of them were silent. "So you're following some code that you didn't know existed at all until it was activated," Adams said at last. "Is that correct?"

The Positronic confirmed.

“What’s to say there isn’t more secret code? Orders that lie embedded in you, perhaps directed *against* humanity?”

The machine gave no answer.

5.

Topsid's Government District

In a New Universe

Megh-Takarr opened his eyes. All-encompassing blackness surrounded him. He felt a swaying sensation from below. Something was rotating him, making his body dance in its huddled position.

This feeling of having no control over himself had been there for some time now and deeply unnerved him. A muffled rushing accompanied it, and the throbbing of his heart. It was going too fast, but he couldn't change anything about that. He found no peace. How could he? He knew instinctively that this motion wasn't as intended. It held indescribable danger.

For the first time, Megh-Takarr felt a painful impulse emanating from the chambers of his heart. He couldn't form it into a conscious thought, but on a pre-lingual level of his mind, he was hyperaware of one thing: *I have to get out of here!* And quickly.

Cautiously, he stretched out. His muscles screamed under the strain. He felt as though they'd rip in two. His hands, his feet, and the tip of his tail faced resistance. His knees and elbows pushed against the same surface, rubbing along the smoothness of a curved wall. It felt cold—so cold that it penetrated his scales.

His world, formed of wetness, darkness, and fear, was tightly constrained. It enclosed him completely. A touch of claustrophobia overcame him, filling him to the last scale. Panic threatened to make him lose his mind, to transform him into a whimpering thing, a mere animal.

He needed something that meant he couldn't stay in this prison forever. What he absolutely needed was *outside*, with its omnipresent rushing sound and the source of the motion that still threatened danger. It was related to the scratching in his chest and

was a second threat that had nothing to do with the first.

Tentatively in the beginning, then ever more stronger, he beat against the hard wall that enclosed him. Doing so felt right. Like a tiny revolt to show the world outside that he was still there. The seemingly impenetrable something that surrounded him stretched and made a crunching sound. Rips formed, through which gray light shimmered.

Megh-Takarr was surprised at how simple it was. Again and again, he contracted his body, then stretched out and destroyed his world. The only world he knew.

The universe shattered. The shell cracked. The egg gave up its resistance and let him out. In sudden freedom, Megh-Takarr drew in fragrant air. He grasped that he'd banished one of the two dangers, for he was breathing. That too was good and right.

A strong something *whispered* across his mucus-covered back. A new experience: that was a gust of wind. Acting on instinct, he closed his six-fingered hand into a fist. This gave him a sharp pain that cut into his young skin like a claw. Darting his tongue ferociously in and out, he looked at his white-scaled hand, which now had red liquid dripping from its lower end onto his foot. It hurt, but it was warm. Warmer than the wind and the new universe he had ventured into.

The tongue motion distracted him; he forgot the pain as if it had never existed. An explosion of different sensory impressions spread across his taste organ. Everything was new, exciting, thrilling, and horrifying. It was heavy, sweet, enticing, disgustingly rotten and decayed—the wild melange of scents went from the tongue receptors into his mind, making him turn his head one way and another in confusion.

Now he also saw what he was smelling and tasting: there was a square of brightness behind him. Megh-Takarr sensed again the ominous motion and recognized his new world bit by bit in the gray twilight. Lines, circles, ovals. Shapes glimpsed for the first time, and yet already familiar, as a part of his soul deep inside knew very well what they meant.

Megh-Takarr got first to his knees, then his feet. He took an uncertain step on the swaying, intertwined sticks. His soles stepped on pieces of eggshell. With arms and tail swinging wildly, he reached the edge of his transport vessel and held on there, floating away from the square of light. Thoughts flashed in his mind. *Nest, clutch, water.* They weren't words formed of syllables, but the knowledge was there.

Megh-Takarr had left his egg and found himself in a nest that had held his tiny world until the moment of his hatching. Somehow, the nest had ended up in the water, in the current, and was floating, obstructed by eddies and flotsam, ever deeper into the unknown. There were no other eggs in it, and that was not normal. That knowledge, too, Megh-Takarr possessed intuitively. He felt alone and abandoned. Among the many shapes around him, there were none like him. There should have been a few. A Topsidan didn't step into its new world alone; to prove itself, it had to learn from the mistakes of those who died around it.

Squinting, Megh-Takarr took in the curves and edges of his environment. The nest was floating on foaming waves that rotated and rocked it, almost making it capsize. Along the left and right ran a straight border of gray stone. Beyond that was something that promised him refuge: solid land. He had to make it there.

The darkness was steadily increasing, as if he were crawling back into the egg. For a moment, that was exactly what he wanted; between those hard walls, he had felt more safety than in this strange outside world. Now he was lost, just a tiny speck in the endless variety around him. Behind him, the sharply outlined shape grew ever smaller, disappearing almost completely, and the light with it.

Darting his tongue frantically, Megh-Takarr took in new scents. Some made his stomachs twitch and his esophagi contract spasmodically. Others offered promise, adventure. Everything was new and exciting, but also frightening in a way that made his scales run cold. Disorientation spread through him, intensified by new motion that he caught from the corner of his eye.

To the side of his nest, sharp points slid out of the water. In

contrast to all the other shapes so far, these forms were *alive*.

Animals, he understood. *Enemies. Danger.*

A sudden twinge ran through his chest as the chambers of his heart seemed to consider whether to keep working or not. He pulled his fingers back from the edge of the nest. One of the three serrated fins was ominously close and coming closer still. Through narrowed eyes, he stared at the edge of the cana, where the water met hard, stationary stone. He had to get there. But how?

The pain in his hand returned. Megh-Takarr ignored it.

One of the animals swam closer. The white fin was all he could make out in the darkness, a pale specter. The young Topsidan's body was paralyzed, while his mind fought against it, as if it wanted to do what the body didn't—to flee.

A tremor made him sway. The enemy was throwing itself against the nest. Once. Twice. Then Megh-Takarr's world tipped over. He let out his first surprised hiss, crashed into the wooden sticks, rolled over, and landed amid the gurgling and rushing waves. His heart raced; panic overcame him. He thrashed about with his arms and legs, but he sank anyway, descending into the dark brown liquid that smelled and tasted totally different from the transparent, pleasant-tasting one on his scales.

Water splashed over him as one of the enemies darted closer. Megh-Takarr made out a spectral silhouette five times as long as he was. Above a wide mouth and under a bulge was a single yellow eye staring at him maliciously. The Topsidan tried to swim away but didn't succeed. Sharp teeth bored into his lower leg. He cried out, and liquid filled his mouth, threatening to suffocate him. His leg turned to pure agony.

The pain in his body pulled him towards an abyss where oblivion beckoned. *Come to me. Come and find peace.* It was so simple: if he let go, it could turn dark once and for all, and everything would be fine. The pain would be gone. Forever.

But giving up was not an option. Not for Megh-Takarr. He kicked

with his other leg, drew back his tail like a spike, and rammed it into the small yellow eye above the mouth. There was a crunching sound, something burst, and hot slime ran over his scales before it washed away.

His leg came free as the monster let go, twitching. The water foamed, and dark streaks flowed away from the beast that had tried to eat him.

By now, they had drawn close to the canal's edge. Megh-Takarr hurtled toward it, grabbed it, and pulled himself up. Behind him, other enemies followed. He could taste his own fear, and it burned bitterly on his tongue.

With one more leap, he made it out of the water, rolled across reassuringly hard ground, and found a wall with a hatchling-sized hole in it. Panicking, he retreated into the fissure and looked down at the sewer canal with a wildly beating heart and burning scales. The two enemies bounced up and down in the foaming water, but they stayed in their element. Either they didn't dare brave the dryness or they couldn't exist there. Whatever the reason, Megh-Takarr exhaled. He had survived.

Only now did he take the time to look at his aching palm. A scale splinter was stuck in it. With a jerk, he pulled it out, and in the half-darkness, he looked at the red liquid that seeped out of the wound. Euphoria overcame him, rendering the throbbing in his hand and leg meaningless. He chewed the scale—it tasted fresh and bitter, mixed with his own blood.

Megh-Takarr knew he'd made the first decisive step into a new world.

Megh-Takarr's second eye opened. He blinked into the subdued violet light of his resting chamber. Like many Topsidans, he slept with only half his brain, leaving the associated eye on the opposite side always open, allowing him to perceive danger more quickly. That often extended one's life, especially in turbulent times like these. This trick of evolutionary biology let him counteract his poikilothermic nature, which made him cold-blooded and thus slower during sleep.

"A dream," he hissed into the empty, plainly decorated room. "Just a dream." No one heard him; no one could be bothered by it. But it hadn't been a dream, he realized at once—it was far more than that.

A vision.

In his half-sleep, he had remembered the day of his hatching, but what he had experienced went beyond that, beyond merely a dream. It had ended with a feeling of triumph, and this triumph was waiting for him in reality as well. Very soon.

Megh-Takarr left the round, nest-like bed, pulled on his boots, smoothed his uniform, and stretched. Slowly, he stepped out of the room and into the living space with the silver metal beam in the middle.

The beam rose as high as his waist and stood on two fragile legs of transparent plastic. A brittle work of art. Megh-Takarr ran his fingers over its surface, feeling the countless notches he'd scratched into the soft material with a claw. One for each success, regardless of how great or small it had been. Hundreds of these indentations, long and short, ran across the bar and formed mysterious patterns. Together, they created a symbol that only he understood. Anything was possible, it said. He could achieve anything—all he had to do was want it. It fortified Megh-Takarr on the road to his vision. He saw a strong, growing Topsid that would stand up to Arkon.

I haven't been able to add a new notch for far too long.

Peevish, the despot walked over to the structure, feeling the pain that still radiated from the wounds he had suffered at the Purple Nest and during the subsequent fighting, even after treatment. He had walked right into a trap—but not unprepared, at least. If not for his safety precautions and chest armor, he'd be dead now. The devious rebels would be presenting his corpse, perhaps in a victory procession through the government district of Sendschai-Karth.

Anger rose in him at the mere thought of it. His glands involuntarily exuded a pungent odor as he pictured how Bismall-Kehn had hoodwinked him. The pleasure house owner had belonged to this accursed pile of worthless subjects who called themselves the cold-bloods and had nothing better to do than jeopardize the stability of the despotate's internal security.

Fools! Traitors! No wonder that their ringleader ran a brothel. It fit with these repulsive figures—even if this Bismall-Kehn *had* emphasized so strongly that many honorable figures were frequent visitors. This trap in the Khir-Teyal ghetto hadn't only left Megh-Takarr briefly fearing for his life. No, it had also lost him Erikk-Mahnoli, the Arkonide, whom he needed more desperately than every one of his soldiers.

The damned nest defiler Khatleen-Tarr had stolen the alien from him. If not for her, Erikk-Mahnoli would never have been able to flee. Where could he have gone?

His fingers closed over the bar as if he meant to crush it and the notches along with it. All of a sudden, each indentation felt like a mockery. Every prior success paled in comparison to his current failure. Bad enough that the valuable Arkonide had slipped through his fingers, but Gihl-Khuan's betrayal was far more painful. His best hunter had forsaken him and switched sides. Instead of delivering the Arkonide and the nest defiler to him, Gihl-Khuan had joined forces with the fugitives and ignored his orders. He had defied him—his master, the despot. This despite the fact that he'd seen the hunter as one like him. A kindred spirit, lonely as he was.

"He was only a tool," Megh-Takar hissed, as if to convince himself of the truth in these words. "A tool that served its purpose and is no longer important." But he couldn't make himself believe

that. It hurt to lose a person he'd relied on.

Through the ventilation slits, he heard distant singing from those still celebrating, mixed with gunshots. Despite the rebellion, the capital's populace was marking the three-moon constellation's end with fervor. The city was brewing in a peculiar mix of revelry and war.

The despot had an urge to step over to the window, but he held back. There, he'd see the traces of battle that still endured. He wasn't in the mood for that. Although the rebels were in retreat, he didn't want to spend his few free minutes preoccupied with them. He only had this brief pause for breath before government affairs took hold of him again with their relentless claws. Relentless as only a woman's embrace could compare to.

He shook off all his dark musings. At any rate, he had a little time available. Time for his collection, the only joy he still had left on this world, aside from power.

The despot set out towards his zoo.

6.

Topsid

Approaching the Omzrak Mountains

There's a First Time for Everything

The mountains were a far greater distance away than initial impressions had suggested. By now, Eric Manoli had settled into a mindless walking rhythm; he moved automatically, paying no attention to his aching muscles, ignoring his run-down body. He just kept going. And going.

This must be what it's like to be lost in the desert, he thought. *Close to dying of thirst, you drag yourself onward, convincing yourself of the illusion that, behind the next dune, salvation awaits in the form of an oasis.*

Behind the next dune. That was how it went in stories, anyway. Was it really like that? Did people actually get lost in the desert in real life nowadays? Manoli couldn't help laughing. Which was more implausible, getting lost in a desolate location on Earth, or on a planet full of intelligent lizards? In this crazy new era, these questions were clearly impossible to answer.

"You're so strange, Erikk-Mahnoli," said Khatleen-Karr. "Even now. I'll never understand you."

"What do you mean?"

"We're struggling to put one foot in front of the other, and you look more miserable than I feel—then suddenly, you laugh."

He stopped, leaned forward, and rested his hands on his thighs. "I was thinking, that's all. You have to see the positive in everything."

"I've been thinking too," she replied, to his surprise. She didn't look at him.

A few steps later, Gihl-Khuan came to a halt as well. Right now, Kikerren was sitting on his shoulders, scampering across his broad lizard neck to one side and then the other. Meanwhile, she was preening her wings with hasty licks of her tongue.

“What have you been thinking about?” Manoli asked.

Now her gaze sought his. She breathed out noisily. “About what gives me the strength to keep going.”

“And what’s that?” He smiled wanly. “I could use a little encouragement too.”

She closed her eyes. “The Eleventh Clause of the Social Directive.”

Manoli nodded slowly. “Here is here,” he recited. “Now is now. Consolidate your strength. There is no beyond.”

“Good, Erikk-Mahnoli. You know the directives as well as a Topsidan by now.”

“But he doesn’t understand them,” Gihl-Khuan chimed in. His tail swept across the ground, forcefully knocking a stone away.

“What makes you so sure?” Khatleen-Tarr asked.

“How could he even remotely grasp them? He’s—”

“Not a Topsidan, I know,” Manoli interrupted. “But maybe I understand you, including your wisdom, better than any Arkonide before me.” The lie that he was an Arkonide came out smoothly and without thinking by now. Back at the start, when he’d first woken up on this world, he’d been mistaken for a member of that race, and he had never said otherwise. It was probably better that way. Most likely, no Topsidans even knew that Earth existed, and he wondered how he’d have been treated otherwise.

Gihl-Khuan lifted up his tail and beat it against the ground, drawing an invisible semicircle behind him. “Do you see how *different* he is, Khatleen-Tarr?” he sneered. “So modest. Not as arrogant as the typical Arkonide. Only, he *just so happens* to be

better than the rest of his kind."

Only when this derision poured over him did Manoli realize how his last statement had sounded. "I didn't mean it like that!"

"Forget it," Khatleen-Tarr said, dismissing the matter. "Maybe the time will come to discuss the Eleven Clauses. In the Wise Ones' Stronghold, if we ever get there. We need our strength for something else."

"You're right." Gihl-Khuan came back and took her hand, as Manoli had often seen him do; a strikingly *human* gesture. The two of them clearly felt drawn to one another. And why not? In times like these, people could use whatever closeness they could find.

A somewhat melancholy smile found Manoli's lips at the thought of potentially never seeing another human ever again. He didn't begrudge his two companions—not remotely. Only, it underlined his own miserable situation all the more clearly.

They marched onward, and soon they finally did reach the foothills; it was no longer an optical illusion. The enormous mountain range took up almost his entire field of vision. The peaks were still indistinguishable amid the snow and clouds. Fog and mist rolled down the slopes.

The droning waterfalls echoed loudly, forming a persistent background rumble. By now, the three travelers had distanced themselves from the river that flowed to the capital. They'd followed it upstream at first, but Kikerren had fluttered up and corrected their route several times, darting ahead like an emerald green arrow.

The flying lizard showed them the way; they could only hope that Kikerren really would lead them to Sharp-Eyes.

Try trusting a lizard! Manoli thought again. Strangely, he was finding that easier at this point, maybe because his thoroughly exhausted body nipped any skepticism in the bud. Why waste the effort on strenuous thoughts when that ultimately wouldn't change anything anyway?

Meanwhile, their path led them across several hills and upwards at a pretty steep angle. Each valley between the elevations was shallower than the last, as if the Omzrak mountains had been thrust out of the ground eons ago, shoving the environment together like an accordion.

A strange comparison. As a kid, he'd been able to play the accordion pretty well. Or, as his classmates had put it: "There comes the astrophile with his squeeze box." Not exactly flattering. He hadn't been overly popular. But, he thought with more than a pinch of black humor, he'd gone farther than any of them—he was sure of that, even though he'd lost touch with every one of them—a good few light years farther...

He looked up at the mountains. He still couldn't picture what this ominous "Wise Ones' Stronghold" was supposed to look like. An isolated monastery in the barren alpine landscape, where people akin to monks sought enlightenment? Was he too caught up in his vague concepts of Eastern philosophy? Maybe Topsidian Wise Ones lived in a luxury hotel with all the bells and whistles they could ask for, under an energy dome that kept the elements at bay, indulging in gluttony and eager women all day long.

"Question," he said, the word coming out markedly more quietly than he had intended. He groaned and drew a breath. *Some hero,* he thought. *Gets short of breath at 1.3 gravos on a slow climb up into the mountains.* "Why is no one stopping us getting closer? Doesn't the Wise Ones' Stronghold have guards?"

"What are you expecting?" Gihl-Khuan asked. "For someone to attack us? No one would dare desecrate this holy place with violence."

"Sounds good," Manoli replied. He could hardly believe that, however. Everything he'd seen on Topsid so far didn't exactly speak of restraint.

He noticed that Gihl-Khuan and Khatleen-Tarr weren't moving with nearly as much effortless grace as at the start of their trek. Evidently, the march was wearing them down as well, pushing them to their limits.

Kikerren, on the other hand, was flapping as perkily as ever. Since they had reached the foothills and the air had grown markedly cooler, she seemed to be doing better than ever. Their goal was close now; maybe that was giving her a boost.

"What do you know about the stronghold?" Manoli asked.

"I've never been there," Gihl-Khuan dourly replied.

"And anyone who hasn't been there," Khatleen-Tarr added, "has no idea what to expect. Eskrom-Trogh, the Wise Ones' Stronghold, is a secret. They say no one can even find it unless they're *supposed* to find it."

"And who's supposed to, do you think?" Manoli's face twisted skeptically. "Who are the initiates or chosen ones or whatever?"

Silently, the two Topsidans' gaze wandered to Kikerren, who let out a cheerful caw. "Even the unassuming," said Khatleen-Tarr, "can have hidden qualities and be more than meets the eye. If it's strong enough, it can overcome."

"That almost sounds like a clause of the Social Directive," Manoli remarked.

She darted her tongue in and out, amused. "It almost was. A few generations ago, the Wise Ones discussed incorporating another clause. But the discussions...burned out."

"Burned out?" Manoli asked warily. "In what sense?"

"The conflict escalated on both sides. No unity could be found through the philosophical path." Khatleen-Tarr didn't object when Kikerren landed not on her shoulder this time, but directly on her head. The small creature folded her wings down as if trying to stroke Khatleen-Tarr's snout. "So the soldiers made the decision."

Manoli's eyes widened. "A war?"

"A controlled battle," Gihl-Khuan clarified. "A glorious altercation whose renown reached to the farthest colony worlds. Eight days in a precisely delineated area. In the end, the truth

won.”

“Namely?” Manoli asked.

Khatleen raised her arm and wiped her forehead, prompting Kikerren to hop onto the back of her hand. Then she held the small lizard in front of her chest. “There are only eleven clauses of the Social Directive, and so it will stay for all time. What I quoted comes from the Karr-Tork, our exhaustive collection of wisdom. It expands on the Social Directive, but is subordinate to it in every respect.”

“Stop talking to him about things like that!” Gihl-Khuan demanded. “He’s not a Topsidan!”

“But he wants to—”

“He’s an Arkonide. He should be happy that I allow him by my side! What we do or don’t do is no business of his!” The Topsidan spun around and raised a fist threateningly. “Is that clear, Erikk-Mahnoli?”

Kikerren suddenly fluttered into the air, squawking and zooming away almost vertically. Manoli thought the creature had been shocked by the sudden aggressive tone—but a moment later, the air around him and his two companions began to flicker. Pale green energy walls appeared around and above them—an incorporeal cage that they were trapped in like lab rats.

Manoli didn’t doubt for a second that this energy barrier would prove impenetrable. Khatleen-Tarr clearly disagreed, or she acted on instinct rather than rational thought. She jumped from a standing position into the pale-green surface and collided with the shimmering glow as if hitting a thick wall. Arcing sparks of light twitched to life, and for a horrifying moment, they darted over her body, branching out from scale to scale and buzzing upwards in countless places, making Khatleen-Tarr look like she was burning.

She screamed, a ghostly light filling her open mouth. Her eyes were cloudy with tears—no, with...

Manoli groaned, aghast. Fine plumes of smoke were rising from Khatleen-Tarr's eyes, as if they were melting or burning. At last, the force pushed her backwards. She would have plummeted straight into the opposite energy wall if Manoli hadn't caught her. She moaned in his arms, her body trembling uncontrollably.

"A stupid mistake," said a nearby voice. Two lizards emerged from behind a large boulder, a man and a woman, as Manoli could recognize at first glance by now. "But don't worry. The energy field isn't on a strong enough setting to kill her. The pain will soon pass."

The woman stared at the three caged prisoners. She was missing a few scales on her neck, exposing leathery, dull gray skin there.

So much for no one using violence near the Wise Ones' Stronghold because such a holy place can't be desecrated.

Khatleen-Tarr squirmed out of his arms and stubbornly stood on her own two feet. She may have been hit hard, but she wouldn't admit defeat. "What do you want from us?"

The woman laughed. "You're asking us?"

"Let us go! You're sullying the Wise Ones' Stronghold!"

"You have no idea how wrong you are." The strange woman raised her right arm. The hand was missing, the arm ending at the wrist in a stump. She gestured towards her companion and herself. "We *are* the Wise Ones' Stronghold. How could we be sullying it?"

These words confused Manoli, while Khatleen-Tarr was visibly about to reply with anger. Gihl-Khuan forestalled her. "What gives you the right to hold us captive?"

"We are the Wise Ones' Stronghold," the woman repeated. "So we have any right that we care to take. My name is Thersa-Khrur." She wore a plain skirt of blue material that clung to her thin body, held up by several belts. Her scales were gray in color, but they gleamed as if rubbed with oil. Her missing left hand wasn't the only evidence of an eventful past; she also had a trail of dried, shattered scales that ran diagonally across her snout.

“Then we’re close to our destination,” said Gihl-Khuan. He spoke with an ingratiating voice, no hint remaining of the anger that had seized him mere moments earlier. “We’ve been looking for you. Or for what you stand for. Because that’s what you’re saying, isn’t it? You’re at least a part of the Wise Ones’ Stronghold. You belong to it. Correct?”

Thersa-Khrur fiddled with one of her belts and unfolded a loop in which she rested her arm stump as if putting it in a sling. “Call me a guard. So, you seek the stronghold?”

“We seek wisdom. And the truth.” Gihl-Khuan stepped up close to the pale-green flickering. Only a few centimeters separated him from the energy phenomenon. He did not seem to fear the prospect of touching it and going through the same painful experience as Khatleen-Tarr. He had himself and his body entirely under control. “Because lies flatter. The truth may hurt, but nevertheless, we seek out the pain to win the sweet fruit of insight.”

Manoli wondered yet again who this Topsidan really was. They had met Gihl-Khuan in the sewers below Kerh-Onf during their escape from the capital. He had presented himself as an ordinary man with no interest in the unrest who had ended up between the two sides and been left with no choice but to flee underground.

It was a plausible story. But was it accurate? Gihl-Khuan had shown himself to be a fearless and experienced fighter. Without his help, Manoli and Khatleen-Tarr would have been torn limb from limb by the ravenous hatchlings below the city.

At the same time, Gihl-Khuan had a sad, thoughtful quality about him. Kikerren’s existence had seemed to surprise him, even shake him to the core. And then there had been this armband Positronic. It was clearly broken, but Gihl-Khuan had kept whispering to it. He had ultimately thrown the armband away after they left the sewers. Now he was on their side and acted with a decisiveness that said he had only one goal: the Wise Ones’ Stronghold.

“If you’re quoting the Eighth Clause,” said Thersa-Khrur gruffly, “then do it accurately rather than paraphrasing! Every modification

harbors corruption! Don't you know that every word added or removed carries evil and encourages mistakes?"

"I'm not stupid." Gihl-Khuan raised his right hand and pointed at Thersa-Khrur, his finger so close to the energy wall that a static humming sounded and small sparks danced on his nearest scales. "And I could quote it word for word even if you woke me up in the middle of the night. Much like the Tenth Clause: *Always seek the truth. Direct your rage at the truth, not at he who speaks it. Respect him!* So I respect you, even though you've taken us prisoner. Because I believe that the truth led you to that, or at least your interpretation of the truth. You want to protect the stronghold, and the stronghold bears no lies within itself."

The Topsidan man by Thersa-Khrur's side spoke up for the first time. "You can string pretty words together, I'll admit. But who's that with you?"

"The Arkonide?" Gihl-Khuan asked casually, not letting it bother him that the stranger spoke to him so disdainfully. "He's our companion."

"No non-Topsidan has ever found the way to the stronghold, and I can guarantee he won't be the first!"

"Be quiet, Kalmukh!" Thersa-Khrur barked at him. "We need to think."

"It's never happened," the man insisted.

She paid him no mind. "No situation is ever exactly like the last, because the truth is always redefining itself."

"Look at him! His flaccid form! He's weak."

Before Manoli could reply himself, Gihl-Khuan came to his defense. He seemed able to slip into the role of a sharp-witted debater with remarkable ease. "The Second Clause teaches us: *Strengthen the strong. He who strengthens the weak weakens the whole.* So I understand your concern, Kalmukh. But Erikk-Mahnoli is not as weak as he looks. He has strength within him that elevates him to

something special."

Do I now? Manoli thought, stunned. A few moments ago, it had been a whole different story.

"So, you seek insight?" Thersa-Khrur asked. "That can be arranged."

"What do you—"

Manoli didn't hear the rest of Gihl-Khuan's sentence. Something hissed, and in an instant, the whole world descended into endless darkness.

7.

Earth

Daily Life with Aliens

"Welcome to the eighteenth session of the Terran Union's Inner Council."

It was the usual place and—by all appearances—what had quickly become the usual procedure. Homer G. Adams struggled to concentrate; his thoughts kept drifting a few hours into the past. Had his conversation with the Positronic really only been one day ago? He felt as though he'd been thinking over its contents for at least a week.

Nine men and women had assembled in the conference room on the Stardust Tower's forty-ninth floor. As in Adams's private rooms on the floor above, the panoramic windows offered a fantastic view from the tower that soared into the sky at the city's center.

The sun had risen and illuminated the Gobi Desert, which had been a godforsaken place until just a few months ago when an American astronaut called Perry Rhodan had brought this barren, dried-out sea of salt to life by announcing his vision of a united mankind. At the time, almost everyone had seen Rhodan's actions as pure lunacy, but Adams had recognized at once that a new era had dawned.

And now billions of eyes were focused on this once-meaningless place. Rhodan's vision had become a reality. And it was the duty of its administrator, Homer Gershwin Adams, to make sure this new era didn't go down in flames.

Easier said than done.

He looked around and saw a mismatched collection of people. These men and women came from all four corners of the Earth and had temperaments, mindsets, and value systems that put them at

odds more often than the administrator would have liked.

In that sense, the coordinators of the Terran Union were a representation of humanity's fragmented nature—but also its ability to overcome those differences. And they'd been incredibly successful at that. After some teething problems, the Inner Council's working culture was growing more and more efficient. Its members valued and respected each other, and worked towards a common vision.

Adams's gaze lingered on William Tifflor. The man was a former star attorney who had, amazingly, not allowed his million-dollar fees go to his head, always standing up for the rights of the weak. This man had defended the Arkonide Crest da Zoltral before the US Supreme Court, and this affront to the powers that be had almost cost him his life. It was tough to look at this serious man, conscientious almost to the point of pedantry, and see any resemblance to his adventure-hungry son, Julian, called "Tiff" by his friends. But there were moments when William Tifflor suddenly flashed with an irrepressible zest for life and resembled Julian almost uncannily. Like at this moment, for example—he was deep in conversation with Brazilian Lygia Cielo and clearly flirting with her.

Adams laughed furtively. He remembered those days, but for him, they were over. He cleared his throat. Understanding the signal, Tifflor flashed the energetic Nobel Peace Prize winner one last wink and brought up the agenda on the tablet lying before him on the large, unadorned conference table.

The administrator's gaze wandered on, resting on a man who didn't quite fit with the group and yet absolutely belonged there. Without him, humanity's venture into the future could have ended in a catastrophe very early. He was Asian, the son of a Han Chinese man and an Uighur woman. This thin, wiry man with thick black hair who sat as stiffly on his chair as if he had swallowed a stick was Bai Jun, former Chinese army general and an intelligent, cunning fox.

Once upon a time, the leadership in Beijing had ordered him to either take the crazy American astronaut captive for the People's

Republic, along with his companions, the alien from another world, and the *Stardust*—or simply wipe them out. Bai Jun, the soldier, had loyally carried out his orders until the doubt in him had grown overpowering and he'd switched over to Rhodan's side. Now he served as Terrania's mayor—efficient, pragmatic, and determined to defend his city's interests by any means necessary. He was a highly capable man with endlessly valuable military experience and the right person to keep the city of the future on solid ground while its inhabitants reached out into space.

Apparently, Bai Jun hadn't agreed with Adams's appointment to the administrator post. The former general would rather have seen Perry Rhodan take the mantle, and not just for a few years, but for life. And that was the very Bai Jun whom Adams had to win over. They couldn't afford to have conflict, whether openly expressed or festering beneath the surface.

But the Terran Union's daily affairs came first. One after the other, the coordinators gave a brief overview of the latest developments in their respective fields. William Tifflor, responsible for justice and human rights, and Lygia Cielo, responsible for culture and humanitarian affairs, reported on a joint pilot project between their departments.

"As you may recall," Tifflor began with the customary understatement that he had polished to perfection in a thousand courtrooms, "the *Stardust*'s landing sparked considerable turmoil within the United States."

Naturally, all present remembered this. In fact, a short but bloody civil war had ensued in the attorney's homeland. The fighting had only abated after President Drummond lost his life, a messy but likely unavoidable intermezzo, typical of the birthing pains of a new era.

"Rebuilding of the destroyed infrastructure is making rapid progress," Tifflor continued, "not least thanks to the Ferron and Arkonide know-how that's kindly been made available to everyone in the public database SCIENTIA. But the psychological wounds of those dark days have so far been given only the most makeshift treatment. Political order has been restored, but the courts are

completely overwhelmed with the crimes that occurred during the transition phase. The result is obvious. Many places are still in a state of unrest, with frequent outbreaks of violence." Tifflor nodded at the Brazilian woman—the perfectly arranged choreography of a master of public speaking.

Lygia Cielo continued where he had left off. "Over the past few decades, these situations have started to be approached using what are called 'reconciliation commissions,' especially in African nations. Some of these have achieved outstanding results in establishing peace in societies shaken by civil war. However, there is no denying that they have often failed, mainly because the mediators of the process weren't seen as independent. They might have been in some cases, but if people have already made up their minds, that can be a powerful force."

"That's where we come in," said Tifflor, taking over again. "In Los Angeles, one of the regions with the most upheaval, with conflict still smoldering, we've deployed Ferron mediators."

A few people in the room let out stifled sounds of surprise.

"Yes, you heard correctly," Tifflor continued, cool as a cucumber. "Alien mediators—inherently neutral and independent. In spite of, or perhaps *because* of their alien mentality, the Ferrons are making great strides in reconciling the hostile parties."

He received applause; the idea proved popular. After that, the remaining coordinators reported from their domains. Alan D. Mercant expressed cautious optimism about the security situation. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez IV, the country's former dictator, had voluntarily surrendered to security forces.

"That could save tens of thousands of lives," Mercant remarked, "if it isn't just a ruse. I trust that dictator about as far as I can throw him."

The Danish coordinator for science and technology, Frederik Dahlgren, reported great progress in the fight against Malaria. "In only a few months, we could have a vaccine available—after decades of work without success. We primarily have Fulkar, the Ara

doctor, to thank for that."

Finally, it was the turn of Lesly K. Pounder, the coordinator for aeronautics. Pounder was a stocky man in his mid-fifties and with thinning hair. Until a few months earlier, he'd worked as NASA's flight director, and in that role he had sent the *Stardust* on its historic mission to the Moon. He had suspected that a secret waited there that would set human history on an entirely new path. The rapid progress since then had repeatedly astonished even him, however, and continued to do so. A certain phrase spreading through Terrania like wildfire had supposedly originated with him: *These days, the only people who aren't astonished are dead.*

In other words, Pounder was a sensitive, highly intelligent man and a dreamer. But he didn't let his feelings show on the outside. "Two things," he said curtly. "First, we still have no news from the *Tosoma*. Which is not cause for alarm yet... We all knew that Rhodan might be traveling for months. Repeated daily requests of the kind sadly flooding my office are therefore pointless. I will inform you on the spot as soon as there is any change to the situation."

Adams couldn't help thinking of what they'd called Pounder at NASA: "old dog." He was a man who valued frankness and didn't like wasting time on useless back-and-forth.

"Second," the former flight director continued, "Mars. I've arranged for all activities there, especially with regard to possible terraforming, to be immediately halted. The human and Ferron crews have withdrawn to Bradbury Base and Sinharat Base. The *Nesbitt-Breck* will bring them back to Earth shortly."

"You did *what?*" Maui John Ngata, coordinator for international relations with a nature that was as charming as it was fiery, shot up from his chair. "Why? In the last meeting, you reported that the research on Mars was going according to plan!"

"It was." Pounder's eyes narrowed to slits. At first, Adams had interpreted this gesture as annoyance, but by now he'd learned that the stocky American was simply concentrating. "With the tiny exception that Hung Nguyen, commander of Bradbury Base,

disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Therefore, in consultation with Administrator Adams, I agreed to send the historian Cyr Aescunnar to Mars."

"A *historian?*"

"Yes, and a self-styled one at that." Pounder grinned boyishly. He was enjoying the bafflement and war of words that he was very consciously sparking. "Aescunnar is free of any suspicion and also an unconventional thinker. A specialist in seemingly unsolvable puzzles, you might say. If anyone can shine some light into the darkness, it's him."

"And what did your 'special agent' find? This man who's supposed to justify stopping all Mars research? I can't imagine he —"

"Life and death," Pounder interrupted. He put his hands together on the tabletop, interlocking them except for his outstretched index fingers, which pointed towards John Ngata. "To be precise, intelligent life, and the commander's dead body."

The coordinator for international relations opened his mouth to object—and closed it again without making a sound. What could he say to *that* revelation?

"I never thought I'd live to see *you* speechless, Ngata." Pounder's grin grew even wider. "The cause of the commander's death is still undetermined. As for the life form, as far as we can ascertain at present, it's a kind of plant collective that communicates telepathically. It calls itself 'Santor' or 'half-sleeper.' We're assuming this species isn't native. But how it got to Mars, where it came from, and the ten thousand other questions currently running through your minds are still open for now. So there's no need to speak. I already know them all."

"Does this...Santor pose any threat?" Mercant interjected. The former secret agent was trying in vain to conceal his ire at not being informed about this in advance.

"I consider that highly unlikely. But our investigations are still in

their early stages. The telepath Betty Toufry will head to Mars in the *Nesbitt-Breck* and try to establish extended contact. We hope to gain further information from that. Until then, we're forced to rely on speculation." Pounder drummed his fingertips against the table. "The insights we've gained so far have been copied to your personal Evernet storage, incidentally. You can all access it right now. Draw your own conclusions. But I ask for your absolute discretion to avoid speculation turning into wild rumors. Otherwise, we'll have one heck of a security problem on our hands. Of *that* I am sure. And I don't want to hear hysterical media reports about killer plants from Mars or vegan associations having a crisis of conscience."

No one said a word; only William Tifflor laughed softly. Even Ngata fell silent as he called up the relevant data on his tablet. His curiosity weighed far heavier than his rage at being presented with a fait accompli.

"Thank you for your reports," said Adams, resuming leadership of the meeting. Now his big moment had come. "I would like to add one last point from my side. Mayor Bai Jun, I have a request for you."

Bai Jun raised an eyebrow. He said only one word: "Yes?"

It was clear to all present that this "request" would be anything but. As administrator of the Terran Union, Adams was in a position of authority over the mayor when it came to matters affecting Earth as a whole. And almost anything that happened in Terrania affected all of humanity.

"It's about the Stardust Tower."

"I expected nothing else," Bai Jun replied.

And I expected nothing else but you expecting it! thought Adams. That was how well they knew each other. The administrator had snubbed Bai Jun by giving the tower construction priority over Terrania's energy supply, and he'd done so without justifying it to the mayor at all. Quite contrary to his usual manner. But it had been the only way, because Adams had first had to come to a decision himself...

“Work on the Stardust Tower is entering a decisive phase,” said the administrator. “*The* decisive phase, in fact. I would like to ask you to completely evacuate the city of Terrania within seven days.”

Bai Jun’s eyes narrowed. “An evacuation? Why?”

“The danger is too great. I don’t want to risk injuries or deaths.”

“The tower has been under construction for months. If there’s any risk to the citizens of Terrania, then it’s been there the whole time. Why the sudden change of heart, Administrator?”

“You’re wrong.” Adams shook his head. “The situation has shifted. The work at hand is…of a different nature.”

“Why so vague? Tell me! What secret are you hiding?”

“None. But I have a proposal for you: arrange the evacuation, and in return, I’ll invite you on a little trip that’ll answer all your questions…”

8.

In Darkness

Up to the Peaks, Down to the Depths

One.

He awoke. And the first thing he heard was a heartbeat, loud and booming as a gong, yet infinitely distant—not a part of himself.

Two.

Eric Manoli. The memory of it came straight afterwards: that was his name. It sounded familiar, offered security. So he opened his eyes, but it remained dark, impenetrably black. Because he was still dreaming, he told himself. Because he still hadn't woken up.

Three.

So he had to do exactly that: wake up. Somehow. And he needed light as well. Only, where should it come from? The universe was darkness. But no, light had come, eternities ago.

Thus, insights follow one after another, and Eric Manoli swims up and out of the depths, out of the night-black expanse of ocean that his consciousness has torn open. A shimmer dances above him, far above, a spark that glows like a sun beaming its rays over a long distance.

He had only passed out, nothing more. He'd been dreaming this whole time. There was no cage of pale green energy. No transmitter that had brought him light-years away to another planet. No Arkonides who had crash landed on Earth's Moon—and why should they be there, of all places? There wasn't even a Perry Rhodan at NASA who had taken a fragile rocket to...

But...

...all that...

...*did* exist.

Eric Manoli draws a wheezing breath; his lungs burn; he coughs, spits out the gas that robbed him of his consciousness. His stomach revolts; he vomits again and again, choking out the last remnants of bile that rise bitterly up his throat; and he opens his eyes. This time for real.

He was looking into a lizard eye surrounded by scales. It was smiling. Truly, he saw it smiling.

"There you are, Erikk-Mahnoli," he heard.

"Khat," he tried to say, but his lips were trembling too much, and his tongue was too numb to produce more than incomprehensible mumbling. But he was sure that Khatleen-Tarr understood him regardless. Her eye disappeared, giving way to a view of her chest, then her legs, then her lizard tail.

"Really? You find strength in this Arkonide?" That was the voice of the Topsidan woman Thersa-Khrur, who had trapped them in the energy cage, and it sounded so mocking and condescending that the words cut into Manoli's flesh like knives.

"An attack with Tassorh gas doesn't change who we are," said Gihl-Khuan, who clearly never tired of defending his non-Topsidan companion.

Manoli decided it was time to speak for himself. He rolled onto his side and struggled to his feet. "I seek the truth!" A strand of saliva and vomit dribbled from the corner of his mouth. He didn't let it deter him. "And I'm ready to find it! Let me into the Wise Ones' Stronghold and you'll see that it's not a mistake."

"He's got guts," Thersa-Khrur admitted.

"Or he's stupid," her companion Kalmukh interjected. Manoli noticed for the first time that this Topsidan was maimed as well. His tail ended just above the floor in a scabby, encrusted stump.

The energy cage had vanished. Khatleen-Tarr and Gihl-Khuan were standing with the other two lizards. They were all looking over at Manoli as if to prompt him.

“I’ll take you to the stronghold,” Thersa-Khrur said. “All of you. Even him.”

“Thank you,” Khatleen-Tarr replied. As she spoke, she discreetly looked up at the sky, scanning it; Manoli could imagine why. She was on the lookout for Kikerren, but the flying lizard was nowhere to be seen. Had the two newcomers noticed the small creature before she had fled?

“Keep your thanks to yourself, little dove!” Thersa-Khrur ordered harshly. “You’ll curse me yet!”

The ascent to the Wise Ones’ Stronghold had lasted for several hours already. For a while now, Thersa-Khrur and Kalmukh had taken them up a narrow path that led between tall, jutting rocks. Some pieces looked like they could topple down and bury the hikers at any moment. Maybe, Manoli thought with a shudder, that was indeed their purpose. For all he knew, the stronghold’s guardians could use a simple com impulse to set off a contraption that did exactly that. It certainly seemed no less likely than a spontaneously projected energy cage.

The path meandered up an ever steeper mountainside slope. A strong wind was blowing toward them, making the climb all the more difficult. Tiny water droplets floated in the air like a fine drizzle. In some places, large puddles had formed that they couldn’t always go around. The water was icy, the ground so slippery that Manoli struggled to keep himself from falling.

The climbing party had reached a new high point when the path abruptly ended in a cliff face rising vertically for at least thirty meters. At least, so it appeared to Manoli—before Thersa-Khrur kept walking straight towards the stone wall. Then he discovered the tiny hollows carved into the rock that led upwards in a mind-bending snaking path.

The Topsidan guard used them as footholds and handholds. She gained height astoundingly quickly, not even looking around—and did it all with one hand. She had perfect command of her body. Kalmukh followed her, giving equally little mind to whether the

others even dared attempt the risky climb.

Watching them, Manoli couldn't help thinking of them as wall lizards from Earth that scurried up smooth walls, only enlarged. He wondered why the two Topisdans from the Wise Ones' Stronghold didn't use any specialist climbing equipment. True, they didn't seem to need it as such, but even for them, a climb like this had to entail a certain degree of danger. Why were they taking an unnecessary risk?

But that was evidently the wrong way of thinking. As he recalled what he knew about Topsidans, an explanation came to mind that was as simple as it was seemingly illogical. Anyone who wanted to make it to the Wise Ones' Stronghold had to prove themselves worthy. Every single time. Even if it might cost them their life.

Thersa-Khrur occasionally used the tip of her tail to support herself and push herself higher. In comparison, her companion was handicapped; his dismemberment made his progress slower, despite his two healthy hands.

"Come on, Erikk-Mahnoli," said Gihl-Khuan. "Now we'll see if it was the right choice to defend you."

Manoli grasped the grooves in the stone wall about two meters up. He put his feet into others. He barely found purchase; his toes had to bear his entire weight. The idea of climbing to dizzying heights like this made his stomach turn. "Here is here," he said, quoting the Eleventh Clause of the Social Directive—this time not for any Topsidan to hear him, but to give himself encouragement. "Now is now. Consolidate your strength. There is no beyond."

He started climbing.

The stone grooves were always so far apart that he could only reach them by stretching. But some of them were so smooth and worn that his fingers and feet threatened to slide off them.

That the path didn't lead vertically upwards, but often snaked sideways, made it tougher still. At one point, Manoli had to position his body almost horizontally to proceed. Then he was left with no

choice but to hang using only his hands for a while, pulling himself up until he finally found footholds again.

Eventually, the upper edge of the cliff was close above him. It bulged outwards, forming a small overhang. He broke out in a sweat. There was no way to avoid this obstacle. So he kept climbing. The quicker he put it behind him, the better.

Just then, Kalmukh elegantly swung himself past the stone protrusion. His legs dangled in the air while his hands gripped tightly. Thick muscle fibers bulged on his arms, expanding his scaly skin. In one motion, the Topsidan pulled himself up and raised himself over the edge. A moment later, small stones from exactly that location hailed down, falling at high pressure. Evidently, Kalmukh had loosened them with that action.

The stones flew toward Manoli, who squeezed closer to the cliff face. Something hit him painfully on his neck, then his back; then gravel and dust rained into his hair.

His heart hammered as he awaited a heavier blow that would pull him with it and send him plummeting.

But nothing happened. It was over.

Manoli exhaled deeply. Had it been pure coincidence that he was hit? It had to have been. It *couldn't* be anything else. And yet—how strange that Kalmuhk had happened to endanger *him* in that way...

Silently, he climbed onward.

I'm almost there, he told himself.

Two minutes later, with the last of his strength, he pulled himself over the edge and onto the plateau. His muscles were shaking uncontrollably. He didn't let it show—or tried not to, anyway—and looked into the depths. If he'd lost his grip even once, he would be lying down there now, his limbs shattered...and hopefully dead. He dreaded being heavily injured but surviving, far from the city on one side and the Wise Ones' Stronghold on the other. Khatleen-Tarr might have come back to him, but what would she have been able

to do?

“That was only a small step, Arkonide,” Kalmukh barked at him. The hostility in his voice was unmistakable. “To reach Eskrom-Trogh, the Wise Ones’ Stronghold, you’ll have to be able to *jump!*”

From the plateau, the ascent led on a steep, winding path nestled close against the rocks, zigzagging back and forth. Not the most pleasant walk, but at least they could do it without having to climb.

A few hours passed like that, during which the cloud-fog that hung over the peaks came ever closer. Their two leaders marched on without pausing or wasting energy or breath on conversation. Manoli, too, stayed silent, lost in his thoughts.

Only sporadically did scrawny moss or oddly pale flowers protrude from the endless rocky landscape. It continually grew colder. Manoli wondered if there was anything like a snow line on Topsid, above which the peaks were buried under an icy white mass. Presumably, there was—and when he raised his head, he thought he could make out those snowfields above them. He wasn’t sure, however. It might have just been clouds and fog.

Suddenly, Thersa-Khrur came to a halt. Manoli liked the idea of taking a short break to rest.

She leaned down. “Drink! It’s the last chance before the real climb begins.”

The real climb? Manoli thought, uneasy. And what had that been so far? A gentle stroll? He recalled what Kalmuhk had said: *That was only a small step, Arkonide. To reach Eskrom-Trogh, the Wise Ones’ Stronghold, you’ll have to be able to* jump!

It had sounded ominous, and he didn’t dare imagine what it meant. Manoli couldn’t see exactly what Thersa-Khrur was doing, as he was bringing up the rear, so the other three Topsidans stood in between. However, after her, Gihl-Khuan got to his knees at exactly the same spot. Water was flowing down the slope from above .

Shortly afterward, Manoli bent down over an ice-cold rivulet. He tipped his hands and slurped up the liquid. It tasted clear and refreshed his senses. He hadn't even realized how parched his mouth and throat had been. Right after that, though, a new problem presented itself—stirred up by the liquid, his stomach came to life with a rumble. He was sick with hunger. When had he last eaten?

They kept walking for another hour before arriving at another small plateau. This one offered a magnificent view of the surrounding Omzrak mountains.

But Manoli ignored this grand display of natural beauty. Instead, he stared at the cliff face that towered almost vertically in front of them. It reminded him of the first *truly* taxing portion of their journey, but in comparison, that wall had been a trifle. A nothing. Before him, the gray, smooth wall rose up for at least a kilometer before disappearing into the clouds. Vines or ropes hung down from dizzying heights, hundreds or thousands of meters long.

Somewhere far above them, Manoli saw *something* on the cliff face. A labyrinthine, spider-like form that hung on the vertical rock, practically clinging to it...

Thersa-Khrur grabbed one of the vines with her hand. "We stand before the mountain we call Beelkar. Our holy mountain—the highest on our planet and embodiment of the heights a Topsidan can reach for. I'm giving you the opportunity to turn back now. You would be well advised to do it. Nothing hurts as much as insight." Her gaze wandered to Manoli, who felt dissected as if by a surgeon's scalpel. "For many, the pain is too severe."

"We're not going back," said Manoli, not shying away from speaking on Khatleen-Tarr and Gihl-Khuan's behalf. They *had* to keep going to the Wise Ones' Stronghold. They couldn't turn back now. Even if they managed the descent, where else would they turn? In the embattled city, only death awaited them. They hadn't fled from there for nothing.

"As you wish." Thersa-Khurur did not sound especially surprised. "Then I hereby name you Troghadim."

Khatleen-Tarr turned to Manoli. “Disciples of the stronghold’s Wise Ones,” she explained. “The Wise Ones themselves are teachers, or Trogh. We, on the other hand—”

“I get it,” Manoli interrupted.

“Do you?” Thersa-Khrur scoffed. “I’m not so sure. In the future, if I tell you to jump—or rather, if *any* Trogh tells you—then you jump. Is that clear?”

Manoli assented, as did his two Topsidian companions. The boundaries were in place, and he clearly had no choice but to accept them.

“We’ll see.” The stronghold guard let go of the vine again, reached into her outfit’s belt pocket, and pulled out a small tin. She threw it to Manoli.

He caught it. “What’s this?”

“You’ll find three pills in there, one for each of you. When you reach the stronghold—if you reach it—Kalmuhk will show you to your quarters. That’s when you should take the tablets.”

Everything in Manoli bristled against this order. As a doctor, he instinctively opposed a demand to swallow some unknown pill. “What are they for?”

She made a hissing sound, darted her tongue in and out, and spat. The scales around her snout turned an angry dark shade. “I told you, you jump when I say jump. The same applies to taking these pills.” Without another word, she gripped the vine again, clamped it to the other half of her body under the arm stump, and pulled herself nimbly upwards.

Manoli watched her go, feeling like he was watching a snake slithering up the wall. How could she climb so quickly and elegantly with only one hand?

“You three, follow me!” Kalmukh demanded.

Manoli leaned his head back, looking up at the clinging,

labyrinthine *something* hundreds of meters up.

“If you make it to the stronghold,” the Topsidan continued, “I’ll show you to your quarters.” He, too, climbed up quickly using the vines.

“I don’t trust him,” said Gihl-Khuan. “Unlike Thersa-Khrur, he’s not honest. We should keep an eye on him.” He took hold of a vine and pulled it to test its stability. What if it became dislodged far above them?

Manoli thought back to the moment when Kalmukh had swung onto the clifftop and a bombardment of stones had poured down on him. Had that really been a coincidence? Or had it been a first glance into the abyss of an inscrutable Topsidan?

Khatleen-Tarr stroked his arm, and her tail briefly wrapped around his legs—a Topsidian hug, the likes of which he had never received before. “You can do it, Erikk,” she said. “You have to.”

“I know,” he replied.

9.

Topsid's Government District

A Despot's Daily Life

The despot felt the same curiosity and impatience he always did when going to visit his zoo. The male and female, currently the pride and joy of his collection, would soon mate. He might have already missed the ritual. The idea of that saddened him.

Hastily, he raised his wrist, which bore a multipurpose communication device. Before even leaving the room, a quick sequence of taps had gained him access to the perfectly positioned sensors. He was sure he had enough time.

A three-dimensional image about the size of his head formed above the device. It showed two Arkonides in an environment that resembled the subterranean sewer system from his vision. Interesting... Had his subconscious drawn on more than mere memory when he'd designed this part of the zoo?

The male and female stood side by side on gray stones. A wall hid them from other Arkonides' eyes, but not from Megh-Takarr's flying sensors, which watched their every move. Hurriedly, he rewound the recording. From the look of it, he hadn't missed the precious moment of coitus after all. The two had simply eaten together, chatted a little, fought against the unleashed Tantor bulls with other occupants, but done nothing in particular that he'd missed.

It was better that way. It was more exciting to watch in real time. So the researcher and observer's curiosity could still be satisfied after all. Relieved, the despot went back to live mode and zoomed in on the couple.

He had dubbed the pair Arinar and Dehvon, after two famous Arkonides who had entered the intergalactic stage tens of thousands of years ago; their renown was so great that it had even reached the

Topsidans, and their story—despite all its strangeness—had apparently become one of the Arkonides' classic myths upon which further traditions had been built. Dehvon, the proud soldier, had dreamed of jointly owning his own system, which he could do with as he pleased. Arinar, the sovereign princess, had granted him this wish, or so the story went. Dehvon had waged wars for her, but according to the records, that wasn't the reason she had complied with his wish. Nor had he held a beamer to her temple, which Megh-Takarr would have found more than logical, as it would promise success. She had loved him. Such a strange, confusing, and thoroughly surreal basis on which to found an empire!

"The Tatlira system, gifted out of love," the despot hissed. He often thought of this story, as if it were the key he could use to open the door to understanding the Arkonides. That was why he observed the couple, waited for the act of copulation, during which the sense might reveal itself. What defined the white-skins if not their pride and their capacity for love? In his wildest dreams, it wouldn't have occurred to him to give one of his nest playmates even a single Jall-Sarkirr stew. Gifts were handouts for weaklings. The strong made provision for themselves. Only, the Arkonides didn't grasp that. A wonder that they'd established a stellar empire regardless.

If only I could understand this "love," he thought, as he had countless times before. He was sure that it would reach an apex during copulation. He raised his arm and studied the holographic depiction of the male white-skin's pale face. "Come on, Dehvon! Tell me. What drives you Arkonides? What made you rise to greatness?" The Arkonide couldn't hear him, of course. Nor would he have voluntarily given the answer anyway.

A hiss from the room's communicator interrupted him. Someone wanted to speak with him. Megh-Takarr deactivated the device's three-dimensional mode, switched to silent, and turned to the door. "Open!" he commanded. The door slid upwards, and his advisor, Oric-Altan, stepped in. "What is it?" He made no effort to sound friendly. His fingers stroked the device on his arm.

Without a second thought, Oric-Altan walked over to the work console next to one of the ways out to the balcony that ran around

the entire building. “May I?” he asked curtly, even as he activated the switch that made the floor transparent, spongy Ferr-Durr covering and all.

Actually, only the very edges of the spherical living space turned transparent. The vast majority used positronic calculations to optically adapt to the environment, including its latest changes, thus creating the impression of floating in midair two hundred meters above the ground. A lofty position worthy of the despot.

Megh-Takarr stared at the city below his boots. Even though he knew this view well, it still enthralled him every time. He considered whether to chide Oric-Altan for his willful behavior. Anyone else would have waited for an answer before acting.

The advisor stepped back and lowered his head in a gesture of humility. The question was, did he mean it honestly or was he merely feigning deference?

“Forgive me, Despot, but I wanted to show you the current status.” He gestured towards Kerh-Onf, its countless living towers and lights standing far below them like a three-dimensional game board. Every so often, fire blazed into the violet sky. Smoke billowed above the flames, blighting the metropolis’s radiant beauty. “The fighting still rages, but the rebels are in retreat.”

Megh-Takarr decided to wordlessly accept the apology. There were more fitting situations for an upbraiding. “Have we finally captured Sharp-Eyes?”

“The operation failed. A defector told us his hiding place, but it was abandoned. Someone must have warned him in time.”

Thoughtful, Megh-Takarr stared into the foggy urban canyons. “Sometimes I think we’re chasing after a phantom.”

“We’ll find Sharp-Eyes.” Oric-Altan’s voice held resolve.

The despot’s tail twitched reflexively. Hadn’t Gihl-Khuan been wrong too? He looked at his advisor through narrowed eyes and emitted a scent of annoyance. He disliked this unassuming Topsidan

who, out of all his subordinates, was not only the boldest in dealing with him, but also had the best command over his scents and thus remained unreadable. Not even General Tresk-Takuhn could do that, despite being a master in the field. This perfect emotional control was as impressive as it was irritating.

"Just as you promised me Erikk-Mahnoli?" the despot sneered. "You're the reason I went to that muck district and left with holes in my scales!"

Oric-Altan smelled of amiable calm. "It was an excellent opportunity. That the Arkonide could flee only proves what a valuable individual he is."

"We shall see about that."

Megh-Takarr's gaze swept across the device on his wrist, which still showed events in the zoo, though only on the screen now. Arinar leaned forward towards Dehvon. Her lips parted, and out came a short, fleshy tongue, pink and pert. Was she smelling him? No, probably not. Arkonides were too limited to pick up scents that way.

"Is that all?"

The advisor looked intense for a moment, as if he knew exactly what Megh-Takarr was really concerned with right now. "No, Despot. The supreme military council has requested an immediate meeting. They have urgent news."

"I thought the rebellion had been beaten back."

Oric-Altan's voice remained emotionless. "It's not about the rebels. Follow me, please."

On the way down to the meeting room, Megh-Takarr kept glancing at his wrist device. His two bodyguards and Oric-Altan ignored this behavior as if they couldn't even see it. It was better for them that way. He casually skimmed over reports of other inhabitants of his Arkonide collection.

The Tantor bull attack had lightly injured number two hundred

and forty and number eight. Megh-Takarr also learned that number one was ill, but the question of whether she would survive without medical treatment was far less exciting than the back and forth between Arinar and Dehvon.

Many times now, Megh-Takarr had thought the time must have come at last, and the two would go through with the act, but every time, there had been some inconvenient obstacle. Arkonides argued regularly. Their mating practices seemed to be underpinned by rules and laws that were incomparably opaque and, from Megh-Takarr's point of view, unnecessary complex. He hissed in bewilderment thinking about it.

How can there even be so many Arkonides in the galaxy? They don't even lay eggs—they have only one child per hatching on average and take so long to mate! He himself was proud of having needed no more than ten minutes for his first insemination process, without disappointing his nesting playmates in the process. In the end, it wasn't the length of the act that mattered, but the intensity and the result.

Oric-Altan beat the tip of his tail against the shaft of his boots. Megh-Takarr looked up.

"What is it?"

"You should consider what the council tells you, Despot."

Oric-Altan said no more, as the bodyguards were present, but he didn't *have* to say more. Megh-Takarr knew the lay of the land, and it irked him. The small-minded council hated him for seizing an Arkonide battleship and deploying it for war in the Vega system. Under the new name *Rugr-Krehn*, the ship had been their flagship in the blue-sunned system. Many Topsidans saw the spacesphere as a thorn in their scales, even though the studies of it had gained them invaluable technical knowledge. For them, Megh-Takarr's actions represented a new dimension of violence that could wake the Grand Imperium from its slumber.

Or, to be more precise, they were scared.

Sludgeheads. What do they know of true greatness? They understand nothing about eternity, about the possibilities that beckon the despotate from the future!

Admittedly, it would have been helpful to give the council the real reason for his Vega system invasion: the search for the Planet of Eternal Life. But he couldn't allow anyone to share in that knowledge. The secret was too tantalizing. The Planet of Eternal Life would and should belong to him alone.

The anti-grav lift's upward-drifting flow slowed down and then stopped entirely until everyone had gotten out. The despot stepped into the hallway, wagging his tongue in satisfaction at the familiar surroundings. He didn't feel at home in his living sphere. The inner area's spaciousness, including the balcony running all the way around, felt naked and strange to him. The military conference room, on the other hand, was deep below ground in the bowels of the building, and its character and coloration reminded him of the cramped sewers. A very faint scent of waste water, danger, and adventure coursed through the facility, and Megh-Takarr loved that. It was where he'd hatched; he was intimately familiar with it.

The experiences of his hatching day shaped him, as they did all Topsidans. Each subsequent memory was laid on top of it, layer upon layer, but none was as strong as that one. The start of all things tied them to the future and was, consciously or subconsciously, present in every new situation.

The door came into view and slid open automatically. Megh-Takarr recognized the deep chairs arranged in an oval and the military officers who sat in them, their postures rigid.

Silence abruptly filled the room as the despot entered. He walked over to his raised seat, which was the only one that offered a comfortable height for viewing when a holo played in the center of the nineteen chairs. The other participants had to raise their heads slightly to keep the playback optimally in view.

Beside each seat stood an arm-length storage tray, into which some officers had placed recording devices and personal belongings. Beamers were not among them. Not even Megh-Takarr carried his

weapon in this building, as he knew all too well that it didn't know him by name and could be as dangerous in an enemy's hand as any other. In his eyes, there was nothing more unforgivable than dying by one's own weapon.

When he sat, the officers said as if with one voice, "Greetings to you, Despot!"

He waved a very dismissive hand but didn't open the meeting yet, instead taking a look at each member present, one after another. Eighteen Tass-Dorr councilors were responsible for Topsid's military well-being, six female and twelve male. Every one of them could be dangerous to him, as each was a potential future despot, and coups in the council were so regular lately that in some meeting minutes, they were the first item on the agenda. Megh-Takarr had begun his government post with that same item, after elegantly but irrevocably pushing his predecessor aside.

Which of you would betray me first?

Twelve of the military officers in the Tass-Dorr were close confidants who bolstered Megh-Takarr's position. The other six, however, were unknown variables that could change the entire state of play like the receiver in the Hell-Dare game. Whether that happened came down to two factors: how well he carried out his duties as despot, and Karr-Tork, the fate that demonstrated everything was as it was. In the end, Karr-Tork would decide, for Karr-Tork decided the course of all things.

Will it be Zahk-Kahell? Or Pherk-Dakirr? His gaze swept across Mahrik-Terr, Ghira-Tean, and Shanleen-Ron. *No, none of them. My enemy is sitting directly across from me.*

As if Trevin-Kohn could read his mind, his six-fingered hand twitched. Was he nervous, as he was pursuing ill intentions, or merely annoyed that the despot hadn't started speaking?

Megh-Takarr leaned back; the wounds on his back stung as he moved his skin and muscle, biting like ravenous hatchlings. "What would the council like to inform me about?" he asked. His gaze surreptitiously wandered left, to the device on his wrist.

The conditions were right for him to keep watch on Dehvon and Arinar out of the corner of his eye. They were still sitting together in the enclosure's reproduction of a sewer, speaking with each other. They often whispered into one another's ears so that the sensors struggled to record the text accurately, translate it into Topsidian, and display it. Luckily, it was clearly about something trivial.

Arinar felt uncomfortable. Irrelevant.

Chief of staff Verton-Iror stood up. His reddish-brown eyes calmly looked at Megh-Takarr. "There has been an incident. A patrol shot down an Arkonide recon craft on the periphery of the despotate, near the Tatlira system. As we know, Arkon doesn't recognize this as our territory."

"Are there prisoners?"

Verton-Iror lowered his gaze. He was no outstanding mind, but that was an advantage for despots. The chief of staff would follow every order he gave him to the letter. "One. He's...not an Arkonide..."

"Meaning what?"

The man across from him, Trevin-Kohn, touched the device on his wrist, activating the holo in the middle of the room. "See for yourself, Despot."

Out of the ground, a black figure in uniform rose up to Megh-Takarr's eye level. It was shackled in energy chains. This creature was a Naat.

These low-level minions served Arkon as ground troops. The despot had always ignored them out of contempt. The being was tremendously plump and had neither a snout nor a nose. Its scaleless ball of a head was darting wildly this way and that. Strands of muscle danced on its neck like steel ropes. Unmistakable rage filled its three eyes. The subject's clothes were torn. Megh-Takarr saw countless wounds which could been either consequences of the ship being shot down, or caused by torture. In particular, the

two missing front teeth reminded him of practices of his fleet that were publicly frowned upon, yet common.

Megh-Takarr twisted his lips in scorn. “Clearly they don’t have enough Arkonides of sufficient quality to fill the regent’s fleet anymore. So they’re using these creatures to make up for it.”

The word “creature” stood in stark contrast to what the despot saw. The prisoner was wearing a uniform of high-quality fabric and moving like a proud individual. Aside from the rage, insidious intelligence shimmered in its eyes, and its physical size alone, bulging muscles included, left Megh-Takarr deeply unsettled. Emotionally, it pushed him backwards through time.

Suddenly, he was in his nest again, looking over the wooden edge and discovering the jagged white fins in the foaming waves. His atria reacted to the memory, shooting an echo through him of the pain he’d felt back then as a hatchling.

To distract himself, he looked to the side. The couple had stopped talking. Had the time come at last? Hopefully not! During the meeting he wouldn’t have the necessary concentration to watch properly.

“Can this Naat talk?” he asked brusquely.

Instead of replying, Trevin-Kohn changed the settings. A dark voice rolled across the room like a force of nature: “Get your claws off of me! They will come and avenge me! Novaal is strong. He’ll punish you!”

Megh-Takarr felt his stomach contract and bile production increase dramatically due to the oncoming fear, but he didn’t let it show. It wasn’t the words that made such an impression. Any prisoner could manage such empty talk. It was the Naat’s appearance, combined with the resolve it exuded.

“Is that all? You summoned me for this?” he demanded of the officers as he watched Arinar lie down.

He was met with silence. Megh-Takarr lowered his snout in

satisfaction and kept watching the Arkonides out of the corner of his eye. Maybe the councilors had finally learned not to waste his time with trivialities.

An enemy in captivity making threats? Laughable! What could this Novaal possibly do, even if he came to Topsid? The despotate's army was prepared for anything.

Megh-Takarr thought he had made it through the meeting and could focus on the couple and the search for Erikk-Mahnoli again when Trevin-Kohn hissed lightly. The officer stretched in his chair.

"With all due respect, Despot, there have been no Arkonide patrols spotted in this sector for years. This is highly irregular. What if Arkon has learned of Topsid's weakened condition? Our fleet inventories are filling up too slowly, not to mention the conflict with the cold-bloods."

Dehvon bent down over Arinar on the gray stones.

Megh-Takarr emitted a calming scent and looked around at the councilors. "You're afraid of fog clouds. Well, what did this spacefarer reveal, Trevin-Kohn?"

"Nothing. He was clearly well conditioned against interrogation."

"What? What's that supposed to mean?"

The others hesitated. The man turned his gaze from the despot's face to the hologram. "He's dead."

Megh-Takarr leaned forward. "You incompetent fools! I demand that the officers responsible be demoted! Send recon ships of our own into the region in question and the bordering sectors. Then you'll see that there's nothing to fear!"

Arinar and Dehvon held each other tight and touched each other with their tongues.

I cannot miss it. "I am ending this meeting. I only wish to be disturbed in the future for matters of genuine importance."

He was about to stand, but before he could, Trevin-Kohn sprang up. Dehvon and Arinar let go of one another.

Megh-Takarr rose, fixing narrowed eyes on Trevin-Kohn. He had to restrain himself to keep from shouting at the officer. Instead, he employed a friendly note, while leaning forward with his upper body and tensing his claws in a posture that spoke abundantly of readiness to fight.

“Yes,” he said dangerously quietly. “Just that would be important enough. However, may I remind you that the glorious despotate controls outer systems. Should the Arkonide fleet be detected or sighted in one of those, I demand to be informed immediately.” He looked at every single one of them, watching with pleasure as each of them slumped. “Do you need further instructions for carrying out your duties, or will you now do your jobs without me having to stroke your scales?”

Arinar said something that Megh-Takarr would gladly have heard or read.

The officers stayed silent. No one dared give a response.

“Go! I want to be alone.”

Trevin-Kohn, this time you’ve gone too far. He would have to find a solution for the problem. This officer was too ambitious; Megh-Takarr knew exactly what he was trying to do: discredit him in order to inherit the despotate once Megh-Takarr was deposed or dead. Ultimately, Megh-Takarr hadn’t gained his office through a peaceful election either. Only the strongest could put themselves at the very top, as he was painfully aware—for he wanted nothing more fervently for Topisd than a long, stable, consistent rule that finally dealt with certain grievances for good.

His gaze bored into Trevin-Kohn’s back as the man left the room. *A glider crash? An assassination by the cold-bloods? What exit would you like best, slack-jawed old fool?*

Arinar pushed Dehvon away from her. Her eyes were wet.

Oric-Altain was the last to remain behind, along with the two bodyguards. He looked at Megh-Takarr, unmoving. “Other duties await you, Despot. You know that.”

Megh-Takarr lifted his head. Yes, he knew. His collection was interesting, but he couldn’t forget himself over it or he’d be dead or driven out of Sendschai-Karth quicker than you could say the word “depotate.” But this was a special moment. The mating would be a revelation. Once he’d seen it, he could scratch a new groove in his bar. “I won’t need long. Take the guards and wait outside.”

Oric-Altan obeyed. Megh-Takar didn’t know if he would simply leave, or if he’d remain outside the room as ordered. It wasn’t uncommon for his advisor to have his own business to attend to. Since he was no military officer and certainly no ally of Trevin-Kohn’s, it didn’t matter either way. This Topsidan presented no danger. Quite the opposite—even if he didn’t like the man, he needed trusted figures like that. Ones who promptly made him aware of weaknesses.

At last, the door slid closed. Megh-Takarr sat alone in the violet light and transferred the optical recording onto the central holo. The dreadful black creature disappeared, and in its place sat Arinar and Dehvon, life-size on the gray stones of this sector of his collection.

“I don’t want to!” The female looked around. “You know full well that he’s watching us! We’re like animals to him!”

Megh-Takarr jostled his tongue angrily. The female should have been used to it by now.

“Kesindra...” Dehvon tried to embrace her, but she pushed back against his chest.

“We have to stop this,” she whispered. “I don’t want to be his entertainment program.”

Megh-Takarr rested his forearms on his chest over his uniform. The white-haired one shouldn’t be speaking! It had to finally give in to its hormones and enjoy the pleasure of nesting! An Arkonide

hatchling—or did they use another term for their offspring?—in his collection… This thought spurred him on. It would win over the media networks. It would make the people happy, and that, in turn, would help ensure his position as despot.

Dehvon lowered his head. “Can’t you forget where we are? Not even for a single tonta?”

“No, never.” She stood up and made the male Arkonide sit. And there it was again, the pride in her gaze that characterized this species as much as their soft skin and their breastplate over a single-chambered heart. Her petulance had ruled out the act of coitus and the conception of an Arkonide hatchling.

Dissatisfied, Megh-Takarr switched off the holo projection. Hopefully, Arinar would come to her senses soon. If all his waiting had been in vain, he would replace her—number one hundred and two—with another specimen.

10.

In the Wise Ones' Stronghold

First Glimpses

Eric Manoli was suffering intense breathlessness. Not a single oxygen molecule seemed able to find its way into his blood. Dark stars flashed in front of his eyes, and a thousand needles bored into his flesh.

It was horrific.

Parts of his hands were numb, and those were the *good* parts. The rest...burned. Manoli wished he could put it out. His skin hung in tatters. Blood ran over his fingers. Between the thumb and palm of each hand hung a pale rag of his flesh.

How had he managed to bear his body weight until the bitter end? *And this pale, battered thing in the middle of all that blood—was that his fingernail?* Just looking at it made him feel sick, so he did the only sensible thing: he averted his gaze.

"You surprised me, Erikk-Mahnoli," said Kalmukh. "I was pretty confident that your companions would make it up here. But not you."

"People are wrong sometimes," Manoli managed to utter through pursed lips. *Don't scream... Just don't scream!* He was a doctor, and that was both good and bad. Good because he could give himself at least some basic, makeshift treatment when the opportunity presented itself. Bad because he *knew* how awful his hands looked.

Kalmukh was only moderately worn out. Khatleen-Tarr and Gihl-Khuan stood in silence, their gazes sweeping across the vista. There was no sign of Thersa-Khrur anymore. Manoli looked around too, for the first time since finally reaching solid ground again. Since reaching the top of the vine that had threatened to slip free of his aching hands what felt like a thousand times.

Of course, “solid ground” was relative. He had never seen anything as…as *crazy* as Eskrom-Trogh, the Wise Ones’ Stronghold. The collection of buildings—if you could call it that—clung to the vertical rock face with nothing more than smooth, precipitous stone above, below, and beside them. Not only that, but they protruded dozens of meters from the wall horizontally.

Water showered from above in the form of an endless, unrelenting drizzle. Wind whipped against the crooked wooden shacks, catwalks, and bridges that tilted and twisted into one another. A host of ropes and cables connected it all together, secured to enormous eyelets that had been driven into the rock of the Beelkar mountain.

Manoli’s senses refused to recognize it as reality. This labyrinthine thing *had* to be about to collapse in on itself and plunge irrevocably into the depths. *Anti-grav technology,* he told himself. *Invisible energy fields and hidden metallic support structures… It must all be there somewhere!*

“I know what you’re thinking,” Kalmukh snapped.

“Namely?” Manoli asked, skeptical.

“That the stronghold is supported by technology.”

He felt exposed. “What gave you that idea?”

“Because an Arkonide *would* think that way. You lack the vision to believe in the power of will! A Topsidan defies nature by his own power, because he doesn’t subordinate himself to his circumstances, but stands above them!”

Empty rhetoric, nothing more. He didn’t know what he could say without arousing the Topsidan’s anger, so he repeated himself. “What makes you think you know what I’m thinking?” *Even though he was right…*

“I’m a Trogh,” Kalmukh replied curtly. “You’re a mere pupil. So, what makes *you* think I *wouldn’t* know?” He let out a hissing laugh. “Now, come with me! I’ll take you to your quarters. Get some rest!”

The surface where the vines ended was made of wood, like everything else Manoli came across. The vines themselves were rooted in a several-meter-wide recess filled with dark earth. Were they really plants hanging down for that immense distance?

He was tired to seriously devote any brainpower to it. There would be time for that later. Eventually. After a week of uninterrupted sleep. Only, it was already clear that he wouldn't be graced with that opportunity. Not as a Troghadim, which in the Topsidans' language might mean "Wise Ones' pupil," but that he personally translated as "doormat."

Kalmukh walked across the platform, carefully ensuring he didn't set a single foot on the earth-filled trough. The wood creaked with every step. At irregular intervals, wooden columns loomed out of the ground, on which small, crooked huts hung as if impaled. Behind the door openings, heavy gray cloth fluttered in the wind. Manoli couldn't ascertain whether these dwellings were inhabited or not. No one entered or left them. In fact, he couldn't see any Topsidans at all outside of their group.

Not exactly cozy, he thought, recalling how he'd pondered whether the Wise Ones lived in a high-tech luxury hotel with all the bells and whistles they could ask for. So much for that.

They moved farther from the rock face. Without slowing at all, Kalmukh walked onto a wooden catwalk barely half a meter wide without any handrails. The abyss stretched out on both sides. In the middle of the path, which led to a large, round, hut, he grabbed a robe and used it to clamber upwards.

Not again, Manoli thought, balling his aching hands, trembling.

But the way only led them about two meters up. There, Kalmukh swung onto another platform, the first of myriad platforms that were layered on top of each other, held up and connected by braces and ropes.

Manoli grabbed the rope and confirmed that it felt astonishingly warm—just like the vine he'd used on his endless climb to the Wise Ones' Stronghold. In fact, it was again one of these…plants, not an

artificially made rope. Only, it was lighter, maybe younger. He looked upward, but it disappeared among wooden planks and boards that jutted out at all angles and at various heights.

When Manoli reached the next highest platform, directly after Khatleen-Tarr and Gihl-Khuan, he instantly noticed that the boards ended in a rough, irregular fashion. They looked splintered at the edge, in fact.

“What happened here?”

“A breakage,” their leader replied succinctly.

“Meaning?” Khatleen-Tarr asked.

“The gales tore this part down.”

The neutrality, even emotionlessness, with which Kalmukh spoke about it dealt a blow to Manoli. “Does that happen a lot?”

“Always.”

“What happens to the residents who—”

“So many questions, Troghadim?”

“How else am I supposed to learn?”

“A strange question. But I will quench your thirst for knowledge. Whoever plummets plummets. That is Karr-Tork, the course of things.

“But—”

“Silence, now! This section will be rebuilt, as always happens, and thus new space will be made. Onward! Your hut is at the edge of the breakage.” The Topsidan extended his arm and pointed at something worse than Manoli could have imagined in his most horrible nightmares.

Less than ten minutes later, the three of them entered this “hut.” Three outer walls were still standing—or rather, one complete wall

and two fragments. Half of the abode had been torn down into the abyss during the “breakage,” as the Topsidan called it. The roof was missing altogether. Above the walls was about a meter of empty space before the underside of the nearest platform above.

Which meant they were essentially sitting outside on the ground, with nothing between them and a sheer drop into a bottomless pit. Icy wind lashed in at them and got caught in the wooden frame, which creaked without end. Beyond that, the air held moisture, causing slippery droplets to collect on the wooden floor.

“An idyllic place to rest up,” Thersa-Khrur remarked sarcastically.

“I won’t get a second’s rest here.” In his mind’s eye, Manoli pictured being thrown about by the wind in his sleep and falling off the edge. If that happened, he could only hope he didn’t fully wake up before it was over. How long did a plummet from this height take? With a gravity of 1.3 gravos? And what would be left of him?

“We have no other choice.” Gihl-Khuan went to the only item of “furniture,” a box in the ruined hut’s rear corner, its contorted boards nailed to the floor. He opened it, reached inside, and pulled out a rough blanket. “Good,” he commented. “At least we won’t freeze.”

The Topsidan threw the find to Khatleen-Tarr and got two more blankets out, one of which he gave to Manoli. “Personally, I’m thinking of going to sleep. I don’t know about you two”—he accompanied those words with a hiss of amusement—“but I’m tired.” Gihl-Khuan laid down on the floor by the intact wall, as far from the broken edge as possible.

Khatleen-Tarr followed his lead. Both Topsidans wrapped themselves up in their blankets.

Manoli stood there, somewhat at a loss. But what choice did he have? He couldn’t exactly complain to the stronghold’s management and demand better accommodation…

So he laid down as well, in the corner, less than two steps away

from his two companions, who were lying conspicuously close together. “There’s something else we need to talk about,” he said.

“What?” Gihl-Khuan sounded reluctant. His blanket rustled.

“The pills.” Manoli pulled out the tin Thersa-Khrur had given him. “What should we do?”

“What do you mean?” Khatleen-Tarr asked. “We were told what to do.”

“And you want to just obey the order, without question? Without even discussing it?”

The Topsidan reached out with her arm. “Take one of the pills and give us the others. We’re pupils, Erikk-Mahnoli. Thersa-Khrur is one of the Wise Ones. End of discussion.”

Manoli was too tired to get into an argument with his friends—if he could even call Gihl-Khuan that. He took one of the pills into his hands; they were round and half as large as one of his thumbnails. He passed the tin to Khatleen-Tarr. She had already swallowed while he was still indecisively rolling the strange gift between his fingers.

“Erikk-Mahnoli,” said the Topsidan. “This is the place we were looking for. That offers us safety. They took us in. We have to follow the rules.”

“Where is Sharp-Eyes?” Manoli asked. “Is he actually here?”

“Time will tell.” Gihl-Khuan snorted contemptuously. He took his pill as well. “And now I want some peace.”

Manoli remained hesitant. “What’s so special about this place? Look around you! It’s fragile and dilapidated, and if what Kalmukh said was true, pieces of it keep falling into the abyss!”

“What’s special about it?” Khatleen-Tarr asked. “The Wise Ones’ Stronghold has produced our culture’s greatest thinkers. The Eleven Clauses of the Social Directive were conceived and defended here. And we...will...” Suddenly, mid-sentence, her voice grew drowsy.

“That…is… It…w-wi…” Her head, which had been close to the floor, thudded against it. She lay there, not moving. Light snoring sounds were already coming from Gihl-Khuan.

Manoli went to her and felt her heartbeat and breathing. As far as he could tell, she was just sleeping deeply and heavily.

Was that all? Had Thersa-Khrur just given them sleeping pills? If so, why? To allow their bodies deeper recovery? Or to test their submissiveness, to see if they’d blindly obey the order?

The daylight was fading. To guard against the frigid wind, Manoli swathed himself in the blanket. It was large enough for him to wrap it around himself three times.

His eyes closed. He considered flicking the pill over the edge. He almost did. His gaze went to Khatleen-Tarr. She looked peaceful, for her it had been a matter of course. She *trusted*.

Should he trust as well? It was madness. Whatever these pills’ purpose, they were designed for poikilothermic lizards. In his body, they could do anything or nothing. Could grant him a quick death, or a long, agonizing one. There was no way he could take it. On the other hand…what choice did he have? Topsid, the Purple Nest, this so-called stronghold—he’d been living in madness for months.

Manoli swallowed the medicine. His thoughts drifted away, though he still felt his painful hands…then he fell asleep.

He woke up and practically felt his heart stop. Ice-cold water was running over his face and under the blanket, in which he was still wrapped up like a mummy. His muscles cramped up. He tried to free himself, but his arms were entangled and couldn’t get free.

A second load of water.

For the first moment, a thoroughly bizarre, illogical idea came to mind: *I fell off the edge and fell into the sea.* But if that was true, he’d be dead by now.

“Get up!” a voice roared at him. He realized what was

happening. Kalmukh was still holding the bucket in his lizard hands. “Thersa-Khrur is calling you. The honorable Trogh wants you to bring her water.”

Manoli shook off his stupor. A quick glance showed him that Khatleen-Tarr and Gihl-Khuan were still in deep sleep. “Where is she?” he asked tiredly. His tongue felt heavy. He burrowed his way out of the blanket. His hands barely hurt anymore. The wounds were well healed. Astonishingly well, in fact. The pills came to mind again. Had they accelerated his regeneration? Or had he received other medical treatment of some kind while he was asleep?

“Thersa-Khrur is in her tenement.” Kalmukh clapped something made of leather against his chest: a skin filled with water. “Bring her this.”

“Again,” Manoli said meekly, “where do I find her?”

“Her hut is directly by the rock face. A few dozen meters up, in the top half of the stronghold.”

“How do I get there? Those vines ended at—”

“Fear not, Arkonide. I’ll accompany you until you can’t miss the goal anymore.”

If those words were meant to reassure him, they achieved the exact opposite. The thought of going on another climbing trip, alone with Kalmukh, didn’t appeal to him one bit.

But he had no other options. *Order me to jump,* he thought, *and I’ll jump.* He wouldn’t take that literally, however. During the climb, he definitely would *not* jump...

Manoli strapped the waterskin over his back. The Topsidan urged haste, emphasizing that Thersa-Khrur was waiting.

When they left the ruined hut, Manoli realized to his shock that he felt more fresh and well rested than he ever had since arriving on this world. Just like during their arrival, they encountered no other residents of the stronghold. The path led them back to the vertical face, to the trough filled with earth from which vines grew

down into the depths.

Kalmukh went to the opposite end of the platform, however, where he leaned down and picked up a rope lying on the floor there, wrapped around a post several times. The other end hung down over the edge. “Help me!” he snapped at Manoli.

Together, they wound more of the rope—another of the ubiquitous, strangely warm vine plants—around the post. This pulled up the end of an exceptionally unsteady suspension bridge. The vine branched out, forming each side of it. Wooden planks spanned the space between, often bent and crooked. Some were missing or broken.

“How old is this bridge?” Manoli asked.

Kalmukh stepped onto the swaying structure, which had nothing to hold onto on either side. “We’re in the old heart of the stronghold. So the broad strokes of it would have been built in the first years of Eskrom-Trogh. But don’t worry, Arkonide—it’s been mended several times since then.”

“How long has the Wise Ones’ Stronghold existed?”

“Some say since time immemorial. Either way, it’s older than the first technological inventions and also our reliable historical records. Now, stop asking questions if you don’t want to incur my wrath.”

“Didn’t I do that a while ago?”

“What gives you that idea?” The Topsidan started walking. The bridge wavered, but Kalmukh seemed to effortlessly maintain his balance. His mangled and cut-off tail stuck out like a balancing pole, sometimes leaning right, sometimes left.

Manoli resisted the urge to get on all fours and crawl across the fragile-looking structure so that he could cling to the individual planks with his hands. Instead, he swayed and wobbled forward and was glad he felt so recovered; he could keep his body under control.

The bridge led to a wooden spiral staircase fixed directly to the

rock. Although this looked ramshackle as well, it looked safer than anything else Manoli had seen at the stronghold so far. By his estimation, he was still about ten meters away from it. Kalmukh suddenly turned around in a jerky motion.

The bridge began to swing pendulously. Manoli's heart almost stopped. A jolt of adrenaline surged through his body.

Had it come to this? Was Kalmukh trying to make him fall? A simple, untraceable, perfect murder. *The Arkonide fell.* No further explanation or defense would be needed.

Manoli tipped to the side. At the same moment, he threw himself forward, slapped against the planks, and clung on tight. His body was too heavy; he slid over to the edge. One shake and he was dangling over the abyss to his waist.

"You still have a lot to learn, Erikk-Mahnoli," his leader commented, unruffled.

Manoli didn't ask for help, but pulled himself back up on his own. Behind him, he heard sounds of life. He carefully turned around and saw, for the first time, other Topsidans in the Wise Ones' Stronghold. They were on the platform, working the earth with spade-like tools.

Kalmukh stepped onto the spiral staircase. Manoli followed soon afterwards. In silence, they ascended, circling around and around. The stairs jutted halfway into an artificially hewn hollow in the rock, which radiated icy cold.

Manoli took the opportunity to look around. This granted him a fantastic view of a large portion of the stronghold. Eskrom-Trogh formed a true labyrinth of wooden paths, staircases, shacks, huts, and platforms. Columns and vines supported a thousand crooked structures—all of it clinging to the rock like an insect, squat and hunched.

By his estimation, the structures stretched a distance of about fifty meters from the cliff face. Occasionally, the vines extended higher than the mountain, climbing along the rock toward the peak.

They disappeared amid the fog and clouds.

“Can you reach the mountaintop with those vines? What’s up there?” Manoli was realizing how little he knew about the Wise Ones’ Stronghold. All he’d done was arrive, sleep, and be rudely awakened by Kalmukh. How many Topsidans lived in this structure clinging to the cliff face? How did they spend their time? Where did they get their food from?

It was no surprise that he once again didn’t get a real answer to a simple, clearly expressed question. “That’s none of your concern,” said Kalmukh brusquely. “No one can breathe up there. The air is too thin—there’s hardly any oxygen. And you won’t find the necessary equipment to brave the peak. The stronghold is a place without meddlesome technology, and so it will stay forever.”

The Topsidan pointed diagonally upward, to an area with more platforms pressed against the rock face. Here and there, huts protruded over the abyss in all directions from a crooked wooden rod like grapes on a grapevine. Some of the ever-present vines hung down from there, swinging in the wind. However, Manoli didn’t see any route leading there.

“That’s our destination,” Kalmukh explained. “Thersa-Khrur occupies the lowermost hut.”

“How are we going to get down there? I don’t see any way to—”

“Didn’t I tell you, little Arkonide?” The Topsidan sneered. “I’m with you. You have nothing to fear.” He went up one rotation of the spiral staircase again, then came to a stop on a landing that jutted out with nothing to guard against a plummet. They were standing at least a meter away from the cliff face.

A post jutted out of the ground, similar to the one that had helped them to pull up the hanging bridge earlier. This one, too, had a vine coiled around it. No, two of them. Only, they didn’t hang down, but formed the lower end; some meters up, they were anchored to a wooden rod that protruded horizontally from the cliff.

Horror ran through Manoli's whole body when he understood. "We're going to...swing across?"

"Exactly. A little run-up will get us exactly to the upper platform. I'll go first."

With a queasy feeling, Manoli unraveled the second of the two vines that stretched up to the wooden rod. It felt warm, as he expected by now. He cautiously pulled on it and thought he could even feel a light pulsing.

"Tie it up again!" Kalmukh ordered. "I'll throw you my vine as soon as I'm across. There always has to be one still there." He jumped—and swung in a perfect arc over to the platform. There, he touched down, turned around, and—to Manoli's surprise—didn't just throw the vine to him, but came back himself.

Quickly.

And directly toward him.

Manoli tried to dodge out of the way, but the Topsidan was already crashing against him with his full weight. Manoli was thrust backward, and would have been smashed against the inner column of the wooden staircase if Kalmukh hadn't grabbed him and pulled him over the edge.

He plunged into the depths.

Almost.

Kalmukh held onto him a split-second too long for a perfect murder attempt. Manoli managed to grab the vine above the Topsidan. He felt a horrifying jolt in his shoulder—he was swaying helplessly on the vine, which was swinging far above the abyss. The would-be assassin was hanging directly below him, accompanying him on this involuntary ride. Manoli now bashed his opponent's head with his legs, making the man cry out in surprise and strike again. This time, blindly and without thinking.

Kalmukh's blow with clenched fingers only caught Manoli on the lower leg. The nails scraped over his flesh, drawing bloody

welts...and ripped the vine above the Topsidan's head. It tore with a whip-like crack, as striking as a deadly gunshot at close range.

Manoli was shaken. He slid down, clung on tightly. Kalmukh plummeted. His scream grew quieter, then ebbed away altogether.

There was silence. He didn't hear the impact; the body hit the ground at far too great a distance below.

Manoli's heart raced. He was swinging on the vine under the supporting rod, too far from the spiral staircase on one side and the platform on the other to reach either of them. He didn't have the necessary momentum.

What could he do? Climb up, reach the rod...and then what? There was no way to get to safety from there either. Just the smooth, vertical rock face of the mountain, which loomed about two meters away. Meanwhile, the wind whistled past, crawling under his clothes with its icy fingers. Blood ran from the wounds on his lower leg.

Apparently, it could *get worse,* Manoli thought, desperate.

"I'll come and get you," said a voice.

His gaze wandered to the platform. Thersa-Khrur stood there, a vine already in her hand. She swung towards him, deftly grabbed his vine with his one hand, and pulled him with her to the spiral staircase. She herself only held on with her feet and by clamping the vine between her arm and chest.

Straight after that, she jumped again, and this time they reached the platform from which her dwelling hung like a grape.

Without a word, she took the waterskin, which he still wore over his back, and went to a patch of earth placed precipitously in one of the alcoves carved into the rock. Flowers were growing in it. She opened the leather skin and watered the plants.

"Thanks!" she said. "My lovelies were practically dying of thirst."

Manoli didn't know whether to laugh or scream. It was too

absurd for him to even grasp what had just happened. “Kalmukh,” he managed to utter. “He just... H-He...”

“He was a sneaky, worthless pile of garbage,” Thersa-Khrur said, finishing his sentence. “The fall is long and takes a significant amount of time. Enough time to think. I hope for his sake that he used the time before his death for some self-reflection.” She squeezed the last drops out of the skin into the flower bed. “And now to you, Arkonide. Who are you, and what do you want here?”

11.

Onboard the Nesbitt-Breck

Sightseeing

Conrad Deringhouse pushed the *Nesbitt-Breck* lower. The ship descended into Venus's cloud cover, which swallowed it up.

Here I am again, Adams thought. The last time had been only two days ago. He still couldn't quite grasp it—to Venus and back again, so quickly and easily. Not so long ago, that had been an unfathomably vast distance.

Deringhouse, the young ex-astronaut, steered the former Topsidian recon vessel without a word, revealing a sense of tact that surprised Adams. Adams was just fine with it; he needed his full concentration for the *Nesbitt-Breck*'s passengers.

The contrast between the two men next to him could scarcely have been greater. Bai Jun had belonged to the military elite in the old People's Republic, where he'd been in charge of the lives of tens of thousands—no, millions of people—and ultimately their deaths too. Lhundup had been one of those lives. A shepherd boy from the Changtang plateau, a member of the neglected Tibetan minority driven out of his barren homeland by hardship...or thirst for adventure?

Externally, too, they could hardly have been more distinct. Bai Jun was wiry and slim, one of those men whose age was almost impossible to judge. He looked like a vital man in his mid-thirties, his true age only revealed by the tiny wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. In contrast, Lhundup, with his pudgy face, was reminiscent of a Buddha. His too-short arms and legs exhibited the tender, flawless skin of a baby.

Bai Jun stood stiff as a statue on the *Nesbitt-Breck*'s bridge. He held his arms crossed in front of his chest, his expression closed off. Lhundup couldn't stay in one place. The young man walked back

and forth, cautiously touching the work stations as if to convince himself that he wasn't dreaming. Then he would touch himself on the forehead and murmur something that the ship Positronic translated as "If I told Uncle Dalaimoc about this! He'd never believe it!"

What the pair saw in each other was a puzzle to Adams. But whatever it might have been, it had proven a powerful bond. Otherwise, Bai Jun wouldn't have insisted that his personal assistant accompany him on the flight to Venus.

Perhaps it was his way of making amends. Over the last few weeks, Lhundup had gone to great pains to solve the mystery of the Stardust Tower, all at Bai Jun's instruction. He had gone above and beyond, and now he was experiencing something that must have been even more incomprehensible for the former herdsman than for Adams, who had been an exorbitantly rich man of the world already.

The *Nesbitt-Breck* left the cloud canopy behind. Lhundup gasped and froze in front of the hologram that created an illusion of staring through a window down at Venus. Adams was standing close enough to see him bite his lower lip, his pupils widening.

The enormous pit had grown again. It now spanned a diameter of several kilometers on the surface. Dark pillars of smoke were rising from the vast hole in the ground, mixed with strange blue fumes. On the ground, gleaming bright sparks flashed, momentarily replacing Venus's twilight with a blinding flood of light.

Deringhouse swung the recon craft into a loop, but made no indication of going in for a landing. The *Nesbitt-Breck* circled above the pit—above what was undoubtedly the largest building sight humanity had ever seen.

The huge overlaid discs of the Arkonide refuge were rotating slowly in opposing directions like an immense grinder. The base of the pit was glowing red like the inside of a volcano or—Adams smiled at the naive thought that popped into his mind—like the maw of hell. It was actually rock that the thermal cannons were liquifying into lava.

The administrator stepped over to Bai Jun. He didn't have to say anything; this gesture was invitation enough.

"Adams, what in the world does this have to do with the Stardust Tower and evacuating Terrania?" He didn't waste a single word on the incredible view. A man like Bai Jun didn't allow himself to get awestruck.

"You'll see soon enough, just as I promised," Adams replied. He cast a questioning glance at Deringhouse. The former astronaut nodded. "Positronic?" said Adams.

"I hear you, Administrator," came its soullessly nondescript voice.

"I've made my decision," said Adams. "In the name of humanity, I accept your proposal."

"Your agreement is registered," the Positronic replied.

No sooner had it fallen silent than Bai Jun spoke up again. "What's going on here? What was that voice? *What* have you initiated?"

The administrator turned back to the former general. "You don't trust me," he asserted.

"Of course not. You know my résumé. I was in the secret service and later the army of the People's Republic. I don't trust anyone or anything, or I wouldn't still be alive. Why should you in particular be an exception?"

"You favored Perry Rhodan for the role of administrator."

"Yes." The disarmingly honest answer came with no discernible hesitation. "But I accept your victory. Otherwise, you would not be in the position anymore, I can assure you of that. You were voted in, rightly or wrongly."

"You see it as—"

"But I still don't understand," he interrupted. "This...spectacle is

impressive, that I can't deny. Only, what does it mean? What's happening here? What purpose does it serve to excavate the Arkonide refuge out of the ground? And how is it relevant to the Stardust Tower?"

"Reasonable questions," Adams replied. "And you'll get answers, as I've promised you. Look!"

A last glaring flash sparked at the bottom of the pit. The mobile cannons withdrew, disappearing into openings that appeared in the station. Adams was reminded of worker ants going back into the safety of their hill.

The remaining smoke plumes thinned out and blew away. Small clouds floated off until nothing was left.

The next moment, another explosion occurred below the *Nesbitt-Breck*. The blast wave thrust a fountain of stone, sand, and lava into the air. This reached the recon craft, which was circling roughly two thousand meters up, and fizzled out against the defensive shield. The whole ship vibrated as the shield projectors grappled with everything surging against them.

Groaning, Lhundup clung tightly to his seat. Belts flew out to hold him in place. A metallic creak droned through the ship. The herdsman didn't notice it; he simply stared at the holo with wide eyes and a half-open mouth.

The *Nesbitt-Breck*'s scanners transmitted the show as if they had front-row seats. Further explosions ignited under the refuge. The pit's walls slid, collapsed. Torrents of stone descended, burning up against the defensive shield that had been deployed around the rotating discs like a flickering second skin.

The tremendous structure made an impossible jolt. The force of the denotations carried the station into the air. Only a few meters, but it was enough. Gleaming white appeared in place of the red blaze of liquid rock.

The refuge continued to rise. It was floating above the planet's surface!

Rivers of lava gushed out of the pit, slid over the edges like an unyielding morass, and entombed the area in a deadly, burning hot lid. The holographic image presented it in ghostly silence.

The white didn't disappear, but rather gained in intensity. Propulsion units ignited under the steely monstrosity. Slowly, with a speed of a few meters per second, it finally freed itself from the planet's grasp and accelerated.

The Arkonide station, which had turned into spacecraft of breathtaking dimensions, passed by the recon vessel almost close enough to touch.

The refuge's propulsion units burned even brighter. Spears of flame shot out that reached almost to the ground, and the station left Venus behind, setting a course for Earth.

12.

In the Wise Ones' Stronghold

Live and Learn

A drop of water ran over the edge of the flower bed hewn into the rock; it dripped down and splashed against the wooden platform.

Manoli still trembled when he thought back to Kalmukh's attempt to kill him mere moments ago. Or when he pictured himself hanging helplessly above the effectively bottomless chasm.

"Well, Arkonide?" asked Thersa-Khrur. "Didn't you hear my question? I'll gladly repeat it for you: who are you, and what do you want here in the stronghold?"

Manoli's mind raced feverishly. He had to give the *right* answer. Sure, Thersa-Khrur didn't seem as hostile toward him as Kalmukh, but he could still believe her capable of anything. He had learned how to assess these lizard beings, at least to some extent, but with her, he was still fumbling in the dark. If she didn't like what he said, she could send him flying after her former colleague with one kick...

Nothing stirred on the platform. A curtain moved behind the doorway of one of the huts, which was attached to three wooden columns diagonally above, but that was all. For one brief moment, Manoli saw a lizard snout and small, curious eyes.

"Let me put it another way," the Topsidan continued. "*What* are you? Did you escape from the despot's zoo, or as he arrogantly calls it, his 'collection'?"

Manoli didn't react.

Thersa-Khrur darted her tongue in and out. "You are unusual. More precisely, you're not an Arkonide."

“How do you know that, Trogh?” Manoli made sure to use the formal title, though she addressed him with no such formality. He didn’t like the submissiveness that he showed in doing so, but experience had taught him to act with caution around the lizard beings.

“As you have said yourself, I’m a Trogh.”

“And why *shouldn’t* you know exactly what your disciples are thinking,” Manoli added. “Of course.” Could she actually read his thoughts? It felt improbable, but not impossible. Even among humans, there were mutants who could...

But no. If she was capable of that, she’d also know who and what he was without having to ask. Her Trogh wisdom came from elsewhere. Perhaps a particularly keen sense of observation.

She raised left arm, the stump pointing toward her chest. “In this case, I don’t have to tap into your mind to draw conclusions. I can *see* that you’re not an Arkonide.”

He looked down at himself. His clothes had been mangled during Kalmukh’s attack. Manoli hadn’t even noticed until now. But he understood at once. There was an obvious difference between human and Arkonide anatomy, if you knew what to look for.

“Arkonides have a bone plate under their chests,” she explained, as expected. “Whereas you have individual bones.”

“We call them ribs. You’re very observant, noble Trogh.”

“Stop trying to flatter me!”

A creaking sound. From the hut diagonally above, a Topsidan jumped down onto the platform. The individual floorboards groaned in protest. Manoli reflexively froze up, fearing it would collapse. But nothing happened.

At first, he thought he was looking at a short woman, until he realized that she was simply young—very young. A shudder ran through him as, for the umpteenth time, he recalled the ravenous hatchlings they’d fought in the sewers beneath the capital. And she

had only one eye, a gaping hole where the left should be. Without a word, she walked over to him, lowered her gaze reverentially before Thersa-Khrur, and performed a hurried, complicated gesture with both hands. A special greeting, perhaps, though Manoli had never seen one like it so far, or a secret sign. She grabbed a vine and swung over to the spiral staircase in an elegant, seemingly effortless motion.

“May I ask you something, Thersa-Khrur?”

“That’s already a question, Erikk-Mahnoli.”

At any rate, she hadn’t forbidden him from speaking. Excellent. He could buy a little time.

“Kalmukh had a maimed tail. That young woman is missing an eye. You, Trough, have lost a hand. What does that mean? And why don’t you have a new hand implanted?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

“But…”

The Trogh made a hissing sound, and her head lowered a touch. It was almost imperceptible, but it was clearly threatening. The wind made her dress billow over her chest.

“I gave my hand to obtain insight. If I got a new one, this insight would fade away. It’s not worth that, Erikk-Mahnoli.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You might, in time…”

“When?”

“If you survive the next few minutes.” Another drop collected at the edge of the flower bed. The Topsidan went over, picked it up with a finger, and spread it softly and deliberately onto one of the flowers. There, it gleamed in the sunlight like a precious pearl. “One last time, stranger whom I accepted into the stronghold without asking any questions: who are you, and what are you doing

on Topsid?"

The threat in those words was unambiguous, as was the indication that she wasn't actually his enemy. So far, all Topsidans had taken him for an Arkonide and Manoli had never corrected them. He was a simple country doctor, he'd claimed, from a remote colonial world, and everyone had always accepted it.

Thersa-Khrur wouldn't be satisfied with that story; that much was clear. That left him only two possibilities: a more elaborate lie, or the truth. He opted for the truth.

"An accident brought me to this world. I didn't plan it. My home is a world we call Earth, or Terra. And you're right: I'm not an Arkonide, but a human. Friends of mine set out on an expedition and didn't come back. I went after them, to find and help them."

"You set out on this rescue mission alone?"

He nodded. "Alone." Which was insane, now that he thought about it properly. But he'd do it again. For his buddies Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bull, he'd give his own life anytime.

Thersa-Khrur thought for a moment. "Even if I believe you, Erikk-Mahnoli, if I take your story as the truth—how did it come to be that you dare lay a foot in the Wise Ones' Stronghold? Why did you come here? And what happened to your spacecraft?"

I've started telling her the truth, so I'll keep going. It felt good not to be putting on an act for once.

"I didn't come here in a spacecraft. I used what we call a 'transmitter.'" He let the word hang in the air emphatically. He really had been sent from the Vega system to Topsid by one of those mysterious devices, but his memories of the time after his arrival were patchy. Did this Wise One know more about it? About what had happened before he'd come to the brothel known as the Purple Nest?

But her answer disappointed him. "What's a transmitter?"

So you don't know everything after all, he thought, and gave a brief

explanation of this technology that he didn't understand himself, but which allowed travelers to cross unfathomably vast distances to another transmitter in an instant. So he assumed, at least. His little experience suggested as much.

"Quite a few of these transmitters have been found in the Vega system," he said. "I don't know who put them there or who created them. But after the peace accord, at least one of them was brought to Topsid. That was part of the negotiations."

"The war against the Ferrons in the Vega system was a mistake," Thersa-Khrur said to his surprise. "A blunder by the despot, who pursues expansion at any price. It was insane to advance into that solar system. But you're just as insane, Erikk-Mahnoli. Why did you follow your friends through this…transmitter that neither they nor you understand? You took an incalculable risk. What were they looking for that was so important?"

Manoli smiled, already suspecting the reaction his next words would garner. "My friends were looking for a missing friend."

That appeared to leave the Topsidan speechless. She looked as if she'd never encountered such stupidity before in her entire life. "One after another, you all surrender to an uncertain fate. You belong to a strange culture, stranger. But let me ask you another question."

Here we go.

"What drove the first of your friends to brave this transmitter?"

There was no going back now. "Immortality," he said.

With two fingers, Thersa-Khrur softly grabbed the stem of one of the flowers that clearly meant so much to her, and plucked it. She raised the blue-and-red-patterned bloom to her face and sniffed it. "Immortality," she repeated thoughtfully, pulling off one of the petals with a quick tongue motion. She chewed it. "What do you know about that?"

"Do you want to hear the truth?"

“What else would I want to hear?” Now she bit the entire bloom off its stalk and turned it around in her fingers. A whitish droplet ran from the torn end, and a cloud of aromatic scent wafted over to Manoli.

“Then I’ll adhere to the Eighth Clause of your Social Directive. *The lie flatters, the truth hurts, so seek pain and gain the sweet fruit of knowledge.* Listen well, Thersa-Khrur: I know nothing about immortality. Nothing.”

“And your friends? Do they know more than you?”

“They must. It was a group of three individuals from different species. One of them was a Topsidan, in fact.”

“And you call this Topsdian…a friend?”

“The Arkonide had the name Crest da Zoltral. The human woman was called Tatiana Michalovna. And yes, a Topsidan accompanied them, joining them of his own accord. A man called Trker-Hon.”

“Trker-Hon?” She reflexively crushed the stem. Whitish sap ran over her hand and collected between her scales. “You speak of the Wise One? The Trogh who became who he is in this very stronghold?”

“Presumably.”

“What do you know of him, Erikk? Where is Trker-Hon now?”

“You know the answer, Wise One. My friends were looking for him. I’m looking for them. I ended up on Topsid. Trker-Hon helped bring peace to the Vega system before he went through the transmitter in search of immortality. Since then, he’s been missing.”

They were both silent for a while. All Manoli heard were knocking sounds from the huts below.

“What do you seek now, Erikk-Mahnoli?” Thersa-Khrur asked finally. “Immortality as well?”

“No.” That was just as honest as everything else he’d said. “I want to go home. Just to go home.”

“You can go back to your friends who remain on your planet.”

“You’ll help me, Wise One?”

“Watch out for Gihl-Khuan,” she said, not answering his question. “He’s not what he seems. Now, get out of here!”

Manoli found his way back via the confusing network of vines, bridges, and walkways. He occasionally saw individual residents of the stronghold, but they avoided him, always keeping the maximum possible distance. Some were working, while others were just staring into the distance.

When he reached the hut that had been assigned to them, Khatleen-Tarr and Gihl-Khuan were not only awake, but also quite...active. They were lying on top of one another, wearing no clothes at all. As the wind whistled past them from the fractured edge, they tongued at each other and entwined their tails. Their scales rubbed together—and they didn’t even end their sexual play when Manoli entered. He turned to leave the hut again.

“Stay!” Khatleen-Tarr called to him. “Rest up!”

They evidently felt no shame in this situation—and why should they? They weren’t humans. Their ethical framework was completely alien. To them, the sexual act had a different moral significance. And he, as a human, differed so much from the lizardlike Topsidans that there *could* be no shame; Khatleen-Tarr had made that clear at the Purple Nest. There, too, he had once observed the sexual act, only there, it had been her job as a prostitute. On that occasion, his presence had saved her when her john got far too rough.

Even so, Manoli couldn’t bring himself to stay and watch the lovers. He left the hut again and decided to explore the surrounding environment. Maybe later he’d get a chance to speak with his companions and update them on the latest developments.

He went up one level, hearing voices coming from that direction. Three Topsidans were at work repairing a breakage; clearly, it had impacted more than just the one hut to which Kalmukh had led the new arrivals.

Manoli walked closer and spoke to them. “When was this area of the stronghold destroyed?”

One of the lizards turned to him, while the other two continued working. They were checking the stability of a wooden column that had a large notch in it due to the breakage. It was still supporting a hut; they started hammering boards onto the affected area to bolster it.

The Topsidan didn’t answer Manoli’s question. “You’re the new pupil,” he replied instead. “I assumed it was just a rumor that an Arkonide found the way here.”

“Erikk-Mahnoli,” he introduced himself, stressing it the way Topsidans did.

The man didn’t give his name, however. As far as Manoli could see, he didn’t have any disfiguring injury. By Manoli’s estimation, that meant this man wasn’t a Wise One, but one of the pupils. Maybe that was why he’d actually deigned to talk to him at all.

“Do these breakages happen often?” Manoli asked.

“Hardly a day goes by without a gale up in these heights. They’re part of life.”

“Do a lot of”—*you*, he wanted to say—“us die as a result?”

“You can’t become a Wise One without being exposed to this danger. Life in the stronghold is hard. It’s the only way to achieve insight.”

The wind picked up, rushing across the platform more strongly than before. The load-bearing column creaked worryingly as the two laborers worked on the base of the hut above their heads. Manoli shouted a warning to them. They ignored him.

“How do you obtain insight?” he asked. “When are you taught?”

“Now,” the man replied, confused. “At every second.”

Manoli nodded. He had to divest himself of his Terran ideas. The Wise Ones’ Stronghold wasn’t like a monastery; there were no classes, formal tuition, or special rituals. Just deprivation, hard work, and mortal fear.

The column splintered and bent like a toothpick. The hut crashed down, burying the two Topsidans beneath it. One was only buried to his waist; he screeched in agony, reaching out with his arms and clambering for a handhold on the platform.

Manoli tried to leap forward, to hurry to his aid—too late.

The whole floor broke in half. Only Manoli and the third Topsidan were left standing on safe ground.

A mix of ruptured planks and crushed bodies plummeted into the depths. Manoli watched, his heart racing. There were other levels below them! *Their* hut was down there, with Khatleen-Tarr and Gihl-Khuan inside it...

But that fear was unfounded, at least. The rubble plunged past the old breakage and disappeared from view.

It grew silent. Only a bloody smear at the edge of the new breakage was left as a reminder of the gruesome event.

“You see?” the Topsidan asked, unperturbed, as if the accident had never happened. “We’re learning at every second. Those two—”

“They’re dead!” Manoli cried in horror.

“They didn’t make it. That’s daily life.”

“You’d be dead too if I hadn’t coincidentally spoken to you. That’s the only reason you weren’t flattened!” In his agitation, Manoli realized too late that he was being rude and overly direct.

The Topsidan seemed bothered by neither that nor the two

Troghadim's deaths. He laughed. "Coincidence? It was Karr-Tork, Erikk-Mahnoli! All events lead to the destination that is foreseen regardless."

"Who are you to talk that way?"

Instead of replying, the lizard man exposed his abdomen. A gaping hole was there, supported by a bizarre structure of sticks and threads. Clearly, a fist-sized piece of flesh had been ripped out of his body. Manoli couldn't make out any more specific details before the Topsidan lowered the piece of clothing again.

"You're not a pupil," Manoli said softly. "You're a Trogh..."

"Learn, Erikk-Mahnoli."

"Did you know what was going to happen? And if so, why didn't you warn them?"

"I can't see into the future. But I trust." The Topsidan turned away.

Manoli went back and found their hut—if you could even call it that—empty now. Khatleen-Tarr and Gihl-Khuan had gone elsewhere.

He crouched down in his corner, grabbed a blanket, and peered past the edge and into the distance. He found no peace; the images in his mind's eye wouldn't disappear. He'd been through too much. Seen too much death. Manoli wanted to switch off, but he didn't manage it. His thoughts were chasing each other, adrenaline still coursing through his veins.

Nevertheless, he sat motionless for at least an hour, leaning against the wall, and tried to relax. No one came to the hut in that time; no one spoke to him or assigned him a task.

Eventually, he realized that he had to do something. *Anything.* He left the hut and went back to the first platform. He wanted to feel soil. Wanted to forget that he was in a bizarre, fragile structure clinging to a cliff face thought brought its residents death and

suffering.

And wisdom, if you believed the Trogh.

No one stopped him. In the distance, on other levels of the stronghold, he could make out some lizards, but none of them paid him any attention. At the edge of the trough from which the vines grew, he sat down and ran his fingers through the soil. It felt cold and wet. And *real*.

Pensive, he looked at the vines, which emerged from the earth as thick as a leg, bent over the cliff, then disappeared into the depths. When Manoli followed them with his eyes, the rope-like forms escaped his sight dozens or hundreds of meters down.

He touched them just above the cold soil. They felt warmer than his own skin. Maybe they weren't just plants. Maybe they had more of an animal quality to them. And unless he was imagining things, they seemed to pulsate at his touch. Perhaps even to shift to the side slightly, as if trying to burrow through the soil to get away from him.

They reminded him of an enormous sea creature's claws. An uncomfortable shiver ran down his spine.

The wind was pulling at his body and his nerves. Like the ever-present drizzle, it never seemed to abate. Wasn't there ever a moment's peace in the stronghold?

For a while, he stared into the emptiness, until he noticed Gihl-Khuan. Khatleen-Tarr wasn't with him, and he seemed to have blended in with the Troghadim with shocking ease. He was talking with two Topsidans while stacking up planks with them and nailing them to a kind of raised soil bed. Other pupils were hauling soil over.

The work was being carried out under the supervision of another Topsidan, who was sitting to the side on an improvised bench. Even at this distance, Manoli could see that the right half of his face was burned, the area around the ear no more than a charred ruin. A Trogh, a Wise One, without a doubt. Manoli wondered why they

were all maimed. Did what Thersa-Khrur had said apply to all of them? Had they all achieved insight through their maiming?

A dubious path, in Manoli's estimation. *But they're not like me,* he told himself, as he had many times before. *They're intelligent lizards. They're alien.*

Gihl-Khuan looked like one of them. He adapted to any situation with remarkable ease—the fighter in the sewers, the clever debater in the energy cage, Khatleen-Tarr's lover, and now one of the many pupils in the stronghold striving to reach the status of Wise One.

Manoli wondered if he should at least inform Khatleen-Tarr about Thersa-Khrur's warning. That in the Wise One's eyes, Gihl-Khuan was dangerous. Maybe he'd tell her later, when the opportunity came. For now, she was undoubtedly too biased to judge their companion neutrally; her sexual relationship with him spoke for itself.

Where was this all going to lead? He found no answer to this inevitable question.

In the evening, they appeared briefly. First and foremost, Manoli told them of his experiences and of Kalmukh's death. Khatleen-Tarr looked alarmed; Gihl-Khuan took it with practically stoic equanimity. Then the two Topsidans made love again, not paying Erikk-Mahnoli any mind. How much lonelier could he feel, wondered the human stranded on the lizard world.

Manoli slept restlessly that night, and in the morning, they awoke to see food in their hut, without knowing who had brought it. The colorless loaves tasted bland. There were no drinks, but outside, the constant fine rain was collecting in more than enough places to quench their thirst.

The rest of the day was much like the prior afternoon. Gihl-Khuan mingled with the other pupils, Khatleen-Tarr disappeared somewhere, and no one paid any attention to Manoli. Neither Thersa-Khrur nor any other Wise One approached him.

At one point, Manoli observed Gihl-Khuan moving across the walkways and vines with striking agility. His own strength, in contrast, was diminishing, and the few hours of restless sleep he managed at night didn't help it replenish. The next day, Thersa-Khrur suddenly stood before him and wordlessly handed him a pill. He swallowed it without thinking, slept in the bright light of day, and felt strong again.

But one thing was clearer to him than before: it couldn't go on like this. He had to leave the Wise Ones' Stronghold while he still could. This wasn't his world, and Thersa-Khrur had told him that he could go back to his friends. That presumably meant that she at least wouldn't hold him back. But that didn't tell him where to turn. Should he seek out the Trogh again to ask her advice?

That evening, when he got back to the hut, Khatleen-Tarr was lying with Gihl-Khuan again, and they both looked very…satisfied. Quite unlike him.

"We've only reached a waypoint," he said. "We can't rest on our laurels yet! We still haven't found Sharp-Eyes, and—"

"You're wrong," Gihl-Khuan interrupted brusquely. "What do I care about Sharp-Eyes? Or the rebellion against the despot? I've made it to my goal. Or an important stopping point on my journey. The stronghold offers me everything I need right now."

Manoli suppressed a retort. "What do you think, Khatleen-Tarr?"

"I agree with him."

"But—"

"No but, Erikk-Mahnoli."

Before he could say another world, something flew in with a gust of wind—or some*one*, rather, whom he hadn't thought about for quite some time. He hadn't expected to ever see the little flying lizard again after it had fled so rapidly when their group was caught in the energy cage.

Croaking, Kikerren landed on the wooden chest and scraped her

claws against it. As she did so, she cawed urgingly, and Manoli knew that the time had come to act.

It was now or never.

13.

Topsid's Capital

Enemies and Decisions

The government glider landed on balcony platform 280 of prison tower three, in the Hertak-Tiuth district, quite some way outside of Kerh-Onf's heart. Just as it touched down, the device on Megh-Takarr's wrist buzzed.

Bad timing, the despot thought, but he couldn't resist looking. His thoughts kept returning to his collection regardless. It provided a bit of joy and distraction, at least.

He raised his arm and checked the reason for the notification, although he already had a suspicion. Four days ago, he'd told collection overseer Nhag-Derekk to inform him immediately if Arinar and Dehvon decided to mate after all. For a little while, the two Arkonides had been avoiding each other. Yesterday evening, there had been a kind of reconciliation. Did that mean the path to the goal was clear now?

Megh-Takarr activated the sensor access and had the live recording transmitted to him. He darted his tongue in surprise, for both Arkonides were naked. Not for the first time, he marveled at the strange physical form of these beings; most prominent of all were the woman's breasts, which were used to feed the offspring. Attentively, he brought the display closer to his eyes.

"Despot?" asked Rekarr-Ten next to him. The prison superintendent smelled of nervousness. Her neck muscles protruded with tension, as if their scaly edge were trying to rip the uniform. Was she afraid that he'd relieve her of her post if she didn't carry out her task well enough? If so, she was right.

He looked into her face, which had an excessive amount of unevenly sized scales. Her appearance had certainly played no role in the choice to assign her to this post, as it was, to put it delicately,

repellent. Nonetheless, her eyes held an expression that Megh-Takarr liked: resolve, paired with a hardness that could prove very useful in her line of work. So why should he give a damn about her appearance?

He tapped on the device without allowing her to see the screen. “One moment. I have to attend to an important message.” Fascinated, he looked at Dehvon’s hands as they stroked Arinar’s milky white body.

Rekarr-Ten politely stepped back from his seat and waited. What else could she do? If she was annoyed, she showed it neither with gestures nor with her scent.

Dehvon and Arinar entwined themselves around one another. In the pair’s positions, there were plenty of similarities to Topsidian lovemaking behavior. In the end, the basic construction of their species’ bodies did resemble a Topsidan’s to some extent. Only the fixation on Arinar’s breasts differed from everything Megh-Takarr knew. Feverish excitement spread through him, prompting his glands to exude a sharp scent.

Next to him, Rekarr-Ten was frozen in her waiting position, her pupils slits. Did she assume that *she* had excited him somehow? The thought elicited a gleeful hiss from Megh-Takarr. He turned his head to her.

“Will there be a welcome ceremony with the Gherr-Juan ritual when I disembark?”

The superintendent froze, her mouth hanging open slightly. It took a few moments for Rekarr-Ten to recover from her obvious shock. “No, Despot. We only arranged for visitation of the prisoners. They’re ready for inspection on the platform.”

“They can keep waiting. Prepare the Gherr-Juan.”

It was clear on Rekarr-Ten’s face how preposterous she found this demand. But she was a mere soldier and used to accepting orders without questioning them. Besides, she doubtless knew that it was better for her job security and her health not to draw the

despot's ire.

"At once, Despot. There's a side room we can use for that. However, the arrangements could take a few minutes. I'll come and get you as soon as everything is presentable and ready for the ceremony."

Megh-Takarr made a confirmatory gesture with his hand, prompting her to leave the glider in haste. Finally, he could focus on Arinar and Dehvon's act unimpeded.

With the touch of a sensor button, he switched to the three-dimensional mode. He still hadn't missed the moment of copulation. His curious gaze swept across the two bodies. Their position on the hard rocks looked uncomfortable. Did Arkonides' bodies produce substances that made them feel less pain in moments of inner sexual arousal? Why had he never addressed this question before? He would pass it on to one of the research towers for further investigation at the earliest opportunity.

Eager, he observed the couple, immersing himself fully in the view, as he didn't want to miss a single detail. Arinar's legs slid apart like a pair of scissors. She closed her eyes and offered herself.

Passionate, yes, he diagnosed coolly. *But not as passionate as I imagined.*

Arinar didn't look like she was fully absorbed, to the extent that he could judge the Arkonide's alien body language. She kept blinking and looking up at the ceiling as if seeking something. Clattering sounds in the background seemed to distract her. *They do not submerge contemplatively into the moment. Why not? How can ecstasy ensue if they don't give in to Karr-Tork completely at the moment of fulfillment?*

Despite his confusion, Megh-Takarr liked what he saw. Perhaps what he saw as the Arkonides' weaknesses were actually their strengths: always staying alert, never merely sinking into a breath, but always anticipating the next one before the breastplate even rose.

An interesting thought.

He watched their intercourse until Rekarr-Ten came back.

“The Gherr-Juan is ready.” If the superintendent was confused by what she now saw in miniaturized form on the despot’s wrist, she didn’t show it, at least.

Megh-Takarr switched off the 3D mode and followed her out into the violet twilight with a sense of elation. Finally, he had seen it, and he was continuing to watch it while walking. The mating act had not yet concluded. And the despot still had a little more time to observe the final ebbs of couplation before the Gherr-Juan ritual waited—a brewing of herbs, the concoction of which was specified down to the precise detail, as was the ultimate drinking of it. By requesting it, Megh-Takarr had bought himself valuable minutes.

Alongside Rekarr-Tar, he went into the surveillance room used particularly during rain and storms. He only vaguely noticed the prisoners, who were lined up on a pale green platform below the room. There would be plenty of time to deal with them later.

Ten prison guards accompanied him and Rekarr-Ten to a seating area. Their faces looked expressionless, as befitting of model servants of the despotate. They took up position and stood stock still by the transparent walls, while Megh-Takarr paid no mind to the breathtaking view from the tower of the city blooming with lights, and swallowed the traditional ceremonial brew only incidentally as well, as if cleaning his teeth. His primary focus was still Arinar and Dehvon. As soon as they separated from one another, they started arguing again. As the audio was switched off, Megh-Takarr had to follow along via the projected text, which took some effort, since the two Arkonides spoke and shouted at each other so quickly.

“Despot...” Rekarr-Ten broke off pitifully. It took her two attempts before she managed to speak the next sentence. “The ceremony is over. May I lead you to the prisoners, as originally requested?”

Megh-Takarr made a patronizing hand gesture. He’d seen the

crucial part. His initial impulse was to deactivate the transmission, but he didn't do that after all. Perhaps a second coupling would follow. Among Topsidans, at least, that wouldn't be unusual.

"Please," he said.

Rekarr-Ten looked at him, surprised, lowered her snout, and led him out into the biting wind. They were currently on the flat roof of the uppermost level, where any unpermitted approach was made impossible not only by metal bars, but an energy field as well. Several raised surveillance platforms with single-person cabins allowed the guards to comfortably keep the prisoners in view when they received permission to go outside.

On this day, only the surviving rebels were lined up on the lower level. The cold-bloods' uprising had finally been crushed. Finally, peace could return to Topsid's internal affairs. The councilors had even calmed down when it came to external affairs; the patrols ordered by Megh-Takarr had found no trace of Arkonide ships. By all appearances, the despot had been right: the alien soldier had been in that sector purely by happenstance. This "Novaal" invoked by him wouldn't come.

Megh-Takarr stepped onto the elevated walkway that surrounded the space in the middle edged with metal grilles. He stepped right up to the edge and took in the few survivors of the rebellion. They stood naked before him, robbed of all clothing, as befitting of subjects excluded from society. None of them were uninjured. Festering, poorly healed lesions; swellings; torn neck scale flaps—those were the least severe wounds. Several rebels were missing fingers or toes, while three were seriously maimed.

Good.

Another might perhaps have felt sympathy upon seeing their battered forms. Megh-Takarr, however, felt gratification. These nest defilers had attacked his city and declared war on the despotate. Many residential towers had been impacted by fires and explosions, and even the Festival of the Three Moons couldn't be celebrated with the usual jubilance. The nesting rate after the festival had been significantly lower than in previous years; good for the problem of

overpopulation on the one hand, but bad for tradition on the other.

Slowly, he paced the circumference, accompanied by Rekarr-Ten, until his gaze fell on a green-scaled figure he'd hoped never to see again. He stopped, unable to keep himself from darting his tongue in and out.

"What is this nest defiler doing among the survivors? He should be lying in cold storage, or better yet, rotting in the sun outside the city!"

Rekarr-Ten's tail twitched nervously, as if seeking additional purchase. "Despot, Bismall-Kehn is a surviving rebel like all the others. He—"

"I know who he is!" Megh-Takarr interrupted. "But what *you* evidently *don't* know is that he's responsible for an attempt on my life! Why is he still breathing?"

Rekarr-Ten didn't avert her gaze. Her defiant posture elicited grudging respect from the despot. "With respect, Despot, I received no order to execute him."

"As if one would be necessary," Megh-Takar hissed. "What about the other forty inmates who met an unexpected death in your custody due to *underlying health conditions*?"

The superintendent fell silent. It was common for prisoners to die during interrogations, especially when the crime was high treason. It was also the rule to obfuscate this in official reports.

Megh-Takarr took a deep breath and regulated his scent. "I'm going down there." He wanted to see Bismall-Kehn up close, to fully savor his triumph over him and this pointless rebellion. He touched the grip of his beam weapon.

Rekarr-Ten hesitated to give her assent. "Despot...do you know the nature of the floor?"

He knew perfectly well. If any arguments or uprisings broke out among the prisoners, the terrain could be electrified. "You surely don't intend to electrocute me, do you, Superintendent?"

“No,” she said, stating the obvious. She raised her head. “I’ll go with you.”

“Not necessary.” He pointed at the plastic bands the prisoners wore on their necks, wrists, and ankles. Tiny cables led to their scaly skin. Through those, impulses could be transmitted to their nerve cells. “Precautions are in place, I assume?”

“Of course, Despot.”

“Excellent.” He stepped onto a rectangular transport platform and rode down right into the middle of the rows of injured prisoners. Full of purpose, he walked over to the former proprietor of the Purple Nest.

Bismall-Kehn looked no better or worse than his fellow inmates. Several cuts ran across his belly and chest, and two small patches had been cut out of the skin on his thigh. Looking at him, it was clear that he’d lost too much weight far too quickly. His cheeks looked wrinkled. He wasn’t missing any teeth, but a mixture of blood and mucus floated in an empty eye socket.

“Release the speech prevention!” Megh-Takarr ordered, watching as almost immediately, a red light on the ring around Bismall-Kehn’s neck turned blue. This change in settings would enable Bismall-Kehn to speak without receiving an electric shock.

Megh-Takarr positioned himself in front of the man. Triumph filled him, making him feel like he was growing in front of the prisoner. “How does it feel to have failed?”

The former brothel owner’s single eye stared at him with hatred and superiority. “We haven’t failed, Despot. Sharp-Eyes is free. We will regroup and return. Topsid as you know it will fall.”

Megh-Takarr froze. This was supposed to be a broken man? Someone who had had his wits beaten out of him through his nasal passages? He raised his hand, directing one threatening finger at Bismall-Kehn’s remaining eye. The sharp claw stopped a perilous distance from the eyeball. “You don’t see clearly anymore, cold-blood. Your pathetic rebellion has been smashed, and Sharp-Eyes’s

death is just a matter of time. That's assuming your leader exists at all and isn't mere wishful thinking. Die with the certainty of having failed in everything."

"No." The reply came without hesitation or trembling. The eye remained open, its gaze steadfast.

Megh-Takarr flapped his tongue. He'd thought he'd be able to keep his anger under control, but he'd been mistaken. Rage flooded him like a wave. He lowered his hand a little, all six fingers directed accusingly at Bismall-Kehn. The urge to strike twitched in them like a living thing.

"You filthy egg breaker! Why don't you see sense?! Everything you've ever achieved in your life was worth less than Rrakass dung! You've flouted Karr-Tork and betrayed the despotate!"

"Karr-Tork doesn't belong to you alone, Megh-Takarr."

The rudely direct address that Bismall-Kehn used at this moment, combined with the dignified peace he exuded, finally unleashed the frenzied rage in Megh-Takarr. His fingers twitched over the enemy's healthy eye. He wanted to stab it, but was all too aware that Rekarr-Ten and the guards were watching. Did he really want to sully himself with this scum's blood in front of them? He was above that.

Breathing deeply, he took a step back. "You will die as soon as my glider flies off." He turned to the other prisoners, who were forced into an upright posture by their chain rings and could neither speak nor move. "Thank Bismall-Kehn, worthless dregs, for he just signed your death warrants! You'll be executed! All of you. Are you satisfied, Bismall-Kehn?"

The proprietor of the Purple Nest looked proud. "Are you, Megh-Takarr?"

The despot didn't dignify Bismall-Kehn with a response. His gaze sought out Rekarr-Ten up on the tower's surrounding walkway. "Take aim! I've changed my mind. I will stay and watch as this blemish is wiped out of Topsidian history. Right now."

“You’re being rash,” said a quiet voice right next to him. Megh-Takarr turned to it and saw, to his surprise, that Oric-Altan had stepped right up to him without him hearing or smelling it. The advisor must have crept down onto the platform like a shadow.

“Oric-Altan,” he said coldly. “What an unexpected pleasure. Where have you been the past few days?”

“I’ve been acting on your behalf. Take back the order, Despot.”

“Why?”

“It would be a mistake.”

“Don’t come at me with the Third Clause: *Respect life! Maintain it where you can. Eliminate it only when it is unavoidable.* It’s unavoidable in this case!”

“I doubt that. Consider the Tenth Clause: *Always seek the truth. Direct your rage at the truth, not at he who speaks it. Respect him!* These rebels are a symptom, nothing more. You won’t cure the sickness with their death, only create new herds in which it breaks out. Every death brings more hatred and death. But Topsid must be strong, unified. Otherwise Arkon will triumph over us.”

Megh-Takarr considered this. It irritated him that Oric-Altan had hit upon a sore spot. By now, there had been two attacks by rebel sympathizers whose friends had fallen in the final battle. Could he allow for similar scenes to unfold in his city again? Pondering, he gazed at Bismall-Kehn.

“I’m prepared to postpone the execution.” He leaned close to Oric-Altan’s face. “Maybe I’ll even let them go, with lovely probes in their organs that can be detonated remotely at any time. Maybe they’ll still be useful after all, if Sharp-Eyes shows interest in them. For now, they should be kept in custody.”

“A smart decision, Despot. Karr-Tork will reward you for it.”

Megh-Takarr turned to go. Should the last few minutes prove to be a mistake in retrospect, he knew whom he would hold accountable.

14.

In the Wise Ones' Stronghold

Flying Lizards and Burned Faces

Eric Manoli extended his arm. Kikerren fluttered over, squawking in agitation, and landed on his shoulder. One of the emerald-green lizard's wings was bent at the tip and hung there, useless. Her little eyes shifted frantically in their sockets while her feet shuffled restlessly.

"Kikerren." Khatleen-Tarr spoke the name slowly, drawing it out. "I... I forgot all about her."

"She's a messenger!" Manoli said, resolute. "From another world! Another time! She's telling us that we have a mission, a goal!"

Khatleen-Tarr reached out and touched the small lizard's head. As she stroked Kikerren, just as a human might stroke a dog or a cat, her fingers trembled. "You're right, Erikk-Mahnoli." Her voice was a mere wisp, barely audible. "A reminder made flesh."

Gihl-Khuan stubbornly remained silent. He scratched the right half of his face, producing a jarring sound from his scales, like a nail scraping against metal.

"Look, Gihl!" Khatleen-Tarr said. "This flying lizard is showing us that we didn't want to bury ourselves up in a tiny, meaningless corner of the stronghold."

"We're not!" he exclaimed at her.

She didn't respond to his assertion. "We had better goals! Higher goals!"

The tension was palpable, and Manoli knew that it was time for a decision now. About their next steps. About their futures. About the rest of their lives.

“Exactly,” he said firmly. “We’re in denial here. This place was not meant for us. None of us is destined to become a Wise One, to be anointed a Trogh. I’m a lost traveler who wants to go home. Khatleen was a soldier and then a prostitute—she’s traumatized by what she had to go through.”

He cast a glance at her as if to beg forgiveness. She didn’t avoid his gaze, and her eyes held vulnerability.

“And you, Gihl-Khuan,” Manoli continued, “are just as traumatized as she is. I don’t know who you are. But I’m sure of one thing: you’re not what you claimed to be. You’re no ordinary citizen who got caught between the two sides in the cold-bloods’ uprising. You were searching for me and Khatleen-Tarr, right? And now you’re searching for something else—and whatever it may be, it’s not *this.*” He gestured to indicate the structure around them.

All of them fell silent, which Kikerren took as an invitation to caw excitedly again and flap her wings. The injury hardly seemed to hold her back at all. She flew up high, above the walls, since there was no roof to hinder her. She only stopped and sank down again right under the platform above, making noise the whole time.

“She wants us to follow her,” said Manoli. “To Sharp-Eyes. She’s probably been with him the whole time. And we—”

“Kikerren wants to lead us to the peak of the mountain,” Gihl-Khuan interrupted. “To the Wise Ones’ Throne, which is up there, waiting for us.”

“How do you know that?” Khatleen-Tarr asked, staggered.

“Because I *understand* her.”

“You…what?” Manoli uttered.

“I can understand Kikerren. Her language.” The Topsidan looked as though he’d changed completely again. Every one of his motions showed unshakable self-assurance, commanding respect, but also a strange, deeply hidden vulnerability. The flying lizard’s appearance, and what she had said to him, seemed to have changed his mind

completely.

Khatleen-Tarr stepped up next to Gihl-Khuan. Meanwhile, Kikerren landed on Manoli's shoulder, visibly pleased, and didn't make another sound.

"How is that possible?" asked Khatleen-Tarr.

Manoli, meanwhile, suppressed the even more obvious question: *Kikerren has a real language? So she's more than just an animal after all?*

"I know her species well," said Gihl-Khuan. "I lied to you when I met you. I had to be circumspect, because I didn't know how far I could trust you. But she definitely comes from my homeworld, Buntayn."

"I've never heard of a planet by that name," Khatleen-Tarr confessed.

"It isn't...*wasn't* especially well-known," the Topsidan said, his voice suddenly faltering.

"Wasn't?" Manoli asked.

Gihl-Khuan ignored the question. "Maybe I'll tell you about Buntayn one day. But not now. We have to get to the peak. Sharp-Eyes awaits us there."

"It's like you're a whole different person," Khatleen-Tarr stated. Manoli could make out a hint of unease in her voice.

"I agree with you in principle, Gihl-Khuan," said Manoli, "but setting out for the peak would be madness. It's outright suicide. The air's already thin here in the stronghold—what's it going to be like if we go even higher?"

"No one can survive up there without protection," the Topsidan conceded, unruffled. "You'd suffocate or freeze in minutes. But the Wise Ones' Throne is there, which the Trogh visit as well—at least once, as a goal and a highlight of their lives. That's where we have to go. We won't have to stay long to find our answers. We won't be

the first ones to follow this path."

"But how are we supposed to get there? The climb is..." *Impossible,* Manoli had been about to say. But it wasn't. Not for the Trogh. He recalled the vines hanging down from even higher up the enormous cliff face. They represented the way up. A climb beyond all limits and all he could imagine. "We need equipment if we want to attempt it," he said.

"Only Trogh are allowed to set out for the summit and enter the Throne!" Khatleen-Tarr added.

Gihl-Khuan walked to the exit. "Leave it to me. We'll leave tonight. Until then, stay here. Make sure no one discovers Kikerren."

"And you?" asked Khatleen-Tarr.

"I have something left to take care of." Without any further explanation, he left the hut.

When he returned, Khatleen-Tarr made a strangled sound. Manoli stared at him, aghast. The right half of Gihl-Khuan's face was burned, or maybe corroded by acid. Dozens of scales were missing, and the leathery skin underneath oozed and festered.

He looks like the Trogh he was working under, Manoli realized. "What happened to your—"

"It doesn't matter," the Topsidan interrupted.

"You're maimed like all the other Wise Ones. Are you—"

"Didn't you hear me?" Gihl-Khuan roared. "It doesn't matter! I had a mission here in the stronghold. A goal that I set myself. Now we can get moving."

Manoli swallowed the questions this posed. The Topsidan wouldn't answer them anyway—not right now. Maybe later, if there *was* a later. "Do you have equipment for our ascent?" he asked instead.

“The Trogh are cripples,” he said, and it sounded more derisive than anything he’d ever said about the Wise Ones before. “And even they manage it. So what’s going to stop us?”

The argument sounded logical, Manoli had to admit. But that still left the problem of how to breathe on the summit. Without a breathing apparatus, they’d suffocate.

“You asked a question.”

Manoli spun around.

Thersa-Khrur stood by the entrance to the hut. She was wearing the same dress as always, held tight to her body by several belts. “A good one, Gihl-Khuan. However, you phrased it incorrectly. It’s not about *what* will stop you, but *who*.” The Trogh swung her arm out. In her hand, she held a dagger with a curved, split blade.

“Are you saying that’s *you?*” Gihl-Khuan replied.

Thersa-Khrur merely laughed. “You hear how he speaks? Full of derision and anger. Didn’t I warn you about him, Erikk-Mahnoli?” Her gaze landed on Kikerren. “Your visitor is befuddling you. It deceives your minds and leads you astray from the correct path.”

“Certainly not,” said Khatleen-Tarr. “We want to leave the stronghold.”

“And make for the summit?” Thersa-Khrur sneered. “You’ll freeze before you even reach it.”

Gihl-Khuan walked over to her, paying the dagger no mind. “If you’re convinced of that anyway, there’s no reason for you to stop us.”

“Whether you reach the goal or not changes nothing about the sacrilege you’re committing. Is this how you want to die?”

The Topsidan pointed to his burned face. “Maybe I’m *allowed* to go up there.”

“You claim to be a Trogh? You’re—”

“Out of my way!” He raised a threatening fist.

Thersa-Khrur didn’t appear to find this even slightly imposing. She neither lowered the blade nor went on the attack.

“Leave her be!” Khatleen-Tarr urged. “She’s a Wise One.”

To Manoli’s surprise, Gihl-Khuan switched to a less aggressive stance. He even took a step back.

“Shame,” Thersa-Khrur remarked. “If only you’d attacked me after all. I’d gladly have taught you a lesson, you little fool.” She flung the blade, but not at him. Instead, it flew past him, over the edge of the breakage. The weapon disappeared into the depths. “I knew you couldn’t be trusted. I only led you into the stronghold so your two companions could learn from you by turning away from you. Unfortunately, they haven’t taken that opportunity.”

“Enough talk!” Gihl-Khuan demanded. “Get out of my way!”

She followed his request, came over to Manoli, and stroked Kikerren’s head with a soft, friendly gesture. The flying lizard let it happen. “But I warn you,” Thersa-Khrur said, “at the Throne awaits insight. Are you really ready for that? More than one person has already had to find out that it’s easier to live without it.” She went over to the broken edge, sat down, and let her legs dangle over the abyss. She gave the three students she had led into the Wise Ones’ Stronghold no further attention.

Kikerren rose up from Manoli’s shoulder and fluttered around her head once, as if to say goodbye. Then she zipped through the door like an emerald-green arrow. Eric Manoli and his two companions followed her.

15.

Earth

Another Door into the Future

The winter sun stood at its zenith on this day, January 31 of the year 2037.

Homer G. Adams glanced at his pod. His hand was trembling. The device very nearly slipped out of his fingers, which were clad in thick gloves. It was almost twelve. Deringhouse would be in touch soon.

The administrator looked around. He, Bai Jun, and Lhundup were waiting a few minutes' walk from the city's edge on a sloppily asphalted square that was, with a touch of overly generous braggadocio, called Terrania Heliport. A single helicopter stood alone in the middle of the tarmac.

It was a clear day, as was the norm at this time of year. Clear, windless, bone dry, and miserably cold. The men's breath formed steam clouds that quickly turned into clusters of glittering ice crystals as the moisture froze. *This is not for an old man like me,* thought Adams sardonically.

He was wearing down trousers and a down jacket, as was Bai Jun. Lhundup had turned up in his decommissioned uniform, as usual; the cold was nothing to the stout herdsman. The Changtang plateau, where he had grown up, was far harsher than the Gobi and had made him who he was.

What a place for a capital city! Couldn't Rhodan have landed the Stardust *in the tropics?* though Adams, although when he pictured himself sweating there in the sticky heat, he didn't feel a whole lot better. The world was a crazy place—and to top it off, he was living in crazy times.

But he was glad of that.

The administrator's pod vibrated. Deringhouse had gotten in touch. The ex-astronaut was gloating in a geostationary orbit above Terrania in the *Nesbitt-Breck*, at a height of 36,000 kilometers.

"All proceeding as planned," Deringhouse said curtly. "Contact expected in fourteen minutes. Everything ready?"

Everything was ready. Of course.

Adams thanked him and stuffed the pod in a pocket of his jacket. He leaned his head far back, squinted, and looked up at the blue sky. He saw nothing. Of course he didn't. It was still too early to make anything out.

"Is it time?" Bai Jun asked.

"Yes," Adams replied. *Well past time.* He wanted to see it with his own eyes at last.

The mayor gave the pilot a signal. The delicately built Chinese woman, whose bulky pilot's helmet seemed out of place, acknowledged it, and the side door of the lone helicopter slid open.

It was snow white and had apparently served as a luxury air taxi for the People's Republic's leadership. Bai Jun had commandeered the aircraft as the political system in China had collapsed. Now it served as his own taxi for special deployment.

The turbines roared to life and the rotor began to spin, unleashing a bitterly cold artificial storm that made the cold even less bearable.

Adams hurried into the cabin, which was shaking intensely, the droning and clattering painful to his ears. The helicopter was a dinosaur on the verge of extinction. In a few months, this sort of craft would only be seen in museums. When Perry Rhodan had made contact with the Arkonides, he had sparked the largest and most all-encompassing knowledge transfer in human history. A treasure trove of Arkonide knowledge had been opened to them, and that of the Ferrons soon after. And now, thanks to the SCIENTIA databank, it was accessible to everyone on Earth. A

revolution of an entirely different kind. Another door into the future.

Adams was too experienced and too clever to imagine he could foresee what humanity would do with this knowledge. He was only sure of one thing: within a few years, Earth would be unrecognizable. In one way or another...

Warm air blew out of invisible openings in the cabin as the helicopter departed from the ground. Adams took off his hefty gloves and rubbed his hands together in the pleasant air flow. Life returned to his stiff fingers.

The administrator looked down at Terrania. Humanity's capital city had become a ghost town. It would have been depressing if he didn't know exactly why it had happened. Bai Jun had led the evacuation personally. And he'd done it with a level of efficiency that commanded respect from Adams. The mayor had dismissed his praise with a bashful shrug, saying, "I used to be a general. Generals push large masses of people around. It's the main part of our job. I'm just glad that this time it wasn't connected with death and destruction."

The partly dried-up Juyan salt lake came into view. On its far bank stood a sprawling complex formed of a dozen buildings: the Lakeside Institute, where scientists were trying to get to the bottom of the mutants' parapsychic gifts. Even that had been cleared. The administrator wasn't willing to entertain the slightest risk.

The helicopter rose higher. To the south stretched the desert of western Mongolia. On the horizon, Adams could just make out the tent city Bai Jun had set up to accommodate Terrania's populace. To the north, the snowy foothills of the Yinshan Mountains formed the edge of what was visible. This was it—the new center of the world, come unexpectedly to fame and glory.

Hopefully it would stay that way.

The vastness was awe-inspiring, but Adams's real focus was on an entity made by human hands. The Stardust Tower was the tallest structure mankind had ever built. It looked like it was growing out

of the city of Terrania, which surrounded it like a plate, like roots that anchored the building and held it in place. By now, the tower rose exactly 2,207 meters into the sky, and its foundations reached several hundred meters underground.

A suppressed groan made Adams turn his head. Beside him sat Lhundup, staring out with fear in his eyes. His fingers clung tightly to the armrests, his plump hands shaking.

The sight of the tower had stirred memories that the young man likely wished to forget. Bai Jun had engaged his assistant as a simple tower laborer in order to find out why Adams had diverted such a disproportionate amount of Terrania's limited resources for its construction. Lhundup had worked underground, building the foundations—and then pushed through his fear of heights to thwart what he'd thought was an attack on the tower. The young man had gone above and beyond, but clearly just for that moment. His fear of heights was back with a vengeance.

The helicopter climbed higher still, always staying close to the tower, which grew increasingly narrow, these upper floors mere empty shells clustered around a central tube.

At last, the aircraft reached the building's pinnacle. This was topped off with a platform large enough to serve as a landing site for several helicopters at once. In its center, a round hole led downward—the end of the tube that ran through the whole tower. At the edge of the tube's exit, a massive beam jutted ten meters into the air.

A few days earlier, Adams had arranged for a mast to be placed there, and the Terran Union's flag to be hoisted up on it. Now the flag had been pulled down and the mast dismantled. On the tip of the beam crouched an Arkonide robot. It was the last functional model of the various identical robots that had built Terrania's inner districts. The robot stood upright, waiting motionless.

"I don't see anything!" cried Lhundup, the excitement apparently making him forget his fear for the moment. He had left his seat and pressed his face flat against one of the helicopter's side panes.

The pilot brought the aircraft even higher. Adams looked at the tower, then at the blue sky above it, then at his pod. A little over a minute left. If all went according to plan.

“Not long now, Lhundup,” he said. “It’s almost time.”

The seconds passed painfully slowly. The next half a minute felt like half an eternity. Adams tapped his pod, about to inquire with Deringhouse, when Lhundup bellowed, “There it is!”

The administrator couldn’t stay in his seat any longer. He jumped up, catching Bai Jun doing the same out of the corner of his eye—though Bai Jun moved with pointed calmness.

It took a few moments for Adams to find what he was looking for. It was an unremarkable view, but something in the distance was anything but...

A cable hung from the sky, more than two thousand meters up. The administrator followed the black line with his eyes. At the lower end, it bulged into a droplet shape. But the top couldn’t be seen; it vanished out of sight past the helicopter’s roof and rotor.

So, it was true. The refuge’s Positronic had kept its word.

“It’s just...hanging...in the air!” Lhundup stammered.

“No,” Adams replied calmly. Unlike him and Bai Jun, the young man hadn’t been brought into the loop. “It’s hanging *from* something.”

“From a vehicle? I don’t see anything!”

“Not a vehicle. Something much higher up.”

The cable was ten thousand kilometers long—longer than anything Adams could have imagined—and reached into space. It was a product of Arkonide technology, an unimposing miracle that seemed to disappear into the sky’s upper reaches. Earth’s own technology would have already failed in the task of producing a cable of this magnitude that could bear its own weight without breaking.

Adams knew all that, but none of it stopped the cable from taking his breath away. Nor that he knew what was to come. Soon. His heart pounded fast, and he felt like a young man again, his mouth open in wonder.

The cable's lower end flashed to life. The bulbous portion revealed itself as a set of control jets that brought the cable into position, leading it gently into the waiting robot's outstretched steel arms. The robot grasped the cable, effortlessly threading it in. The cable then lowered further, the tip disappearing behind the beam. With nimble, spiderlike motions, the robot clambered after it.

Adams held his breath. The connection held. Tower and cable were unified. And although the administrator had asked a hand-picked selection of chosen engineers and scientists to crunch the numbers, the same decisive question had tormented them all: could the Stardust Tower withstand the strain? The pressure that would have demolished any other building? The sheer force?

"What's the robot doing?" asked Lhundup, unable to make sense of what his own eyes were seeing.

"It's attaching the cable," Adams explained. "Connecting it to the tower."

"Why?"

The administrator didn't answer. Bai Jun remained silent as well. *See for yourself, youngster. Be one of the first to see it.*

Long seconds elapsed. And nothing happened.

The cable didn't tear away.

The beam held.

The tower stood.

Finally, the robot appeared again. It had fulfilled its first task. Its limbs reached for the cable, steeled tools locking in place. The machine clambered upwards, toward the winter sun, carrying out a detailed inspection of the cable. It would take days for it to reach

the other end—the former Venus refuge in its orbit around the Earth.

Homer G. Adams felt the knot that had formed in his stomach loosening. It was done. Another step taken.

The administrator turned around.

“Allow me to congratulate you, Bai Jun.”

“Me?” The mayor sounded puzzled. “What for?”

“For the official opening of our elevator to the stars,” said Adams. “This is just the beginning. Terrania is now a city the likes of which has never existed before: one that is both on Earth and in space. And you, Bai Jun, are its mayor!”

16.

Topsid, the Despot's Collection

The Lovers

Blood-red wisps of cloud floated away past the treetops. Or so it appeared, at least. The sky above the despot's collection was an illusion that could change on an hourly basis, just like the temperature and climate. Nothing lasted; everything was subordinate to inexplicable whims.

Unlike their home.

Maris da Indal leaned back, feeling the tree trunk behind his back and Kesindra's body heat. A wave of homesickness swept over him, as crushing as death, especially painful because his beloved was with him, just as trapped as he was. He'd have given his last pair of boots to be on Irkanon just one more time, in Triant'dor, to look from the Giaton Bridge to the golden Khasurn and breathe in the sharp, fragrant air of his city.

Back then, he had fled to the army, gone out into space, escaping his blinkered family that was frozen in inaction. Now he missed them—every sister, every brother, even the father he despised. It held a certain grim irony that only in captivity did he recognize what he'd had in his former life.

Kesindra rested her head on his shoulder. Furtively, she slipped her hand between the trunk and his body, reaching under his repeatedly patched-up shirt to his back, where she could write on his skin with her fingertips. Communicating in this way took a long time, but they had all the time in the Grand Imperium, and Maris didn't want the despot to find out what they were planning.

It was their secret, their way of rebelling against their hated enemy, the one who was doing all this to them. With absolute certainty, Megh-Takarr would try to prevent it. To him, they were valuable attractions in this crazy place, this zoo of Arkonides and

half-Arkonides comprising 150 fellow captives.

“Have you decided?” she wrote.

“Yes,” he replied using the same method. At the same time, he looked over at the bushes, where two sensor probes were moving between the branches. The little beasts didn’t even try to hide to at least give them the *semblance* of privacy. “Are you sure?”

“Completely.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow. I have the ropes. Terr-Gian helped me hide them. We’ll go to Orange before the energy gates close for the night. I know where there’s a hammock. We just have to wait until darkness.” He hesitated. Sector Orange was under Ketaran da Gelam’s purview. “Ketaran mustn’t suspect anything. He’d stop us.”

“He respects your choices—you know that. Free will is paramount.”

Maris thought about it. True, he couldn’t argue otherwise, but Ketaran da Gerlam wasn’t only their secret leader inside the collection; he was also his superior officer and friend. It pained him to leave Ketaran behind. Even more so than disappointing him through his actions and thus diminishing his own memory.

Kesindra backed away from him slightly. Her eyes held understanding. “What if only I...”

He pushed her hand away. “No,” he wrote, then took her into his arms and dreamed there was another way, but he knew that he was indulging in illusions. In moments like these, he wished he hadn’t managed to awaken Kesindra from her stupor. The young half-Arkonide had sat in the area of the imitation stone swamp, swaying back and forth for tontas, imagining she was sitting in front of the fiction consoles. Her way of “escaping” from this grotesque zoo.

Now she had found a new way. Back then, he and others had tried to rekindle the spark of life in these lost ones. In Kesindra’s case, it had worked. But since then, what did he have to offer her?

Was he really anything more than her betrayer—an enemy who pulled her out of the dream world in which she could have been satisfied and into the hell of reality?

She took his face in both hands. “I know that tormented expression on your face,” she said now; let the sensors hear it. “I’m grateful for every single tonta with you.” She kissed him.

A rustling in the bushes made him turn around. He was half expecting an animal attack, which the despot often set off without warning. He stood up and pushed Kesindra behind him for protection.

From between the branches, a familiar figure emerged: Jildrim Hantar, one of the zoo’s half-Arkonides. Unlike Maris and Kesindra, she barely possessed any clothes anymore. A thin band of silvery material was wrapped around her chest, with a similar cloth covering her hips and pelvis. She looked at Maris, her eyes wide. “I found something.”

Kesindra pressed herself against Maris; he felt the beating of her heart on his back. It was working much faster than his own, which beat slowly but intensely inside him. Jildrim could only have found one thing: the ropes. If she said that out loud, their plan was foiled. The despot would find out at the same moment via the sensors, and if he knew what they were planning, he would definitely separate them. In solitary confinement, under the strictest observation, they would have to give up on their scheme.

“Please,” said Kesindra. She looked at Jildrim, wide-eyed herself. Her body trembled. She hadn’t always been friendly with the half-Arkonide, who was an outsider even in the collection. Recently, however, the two had grown to respect each other in captivity, and fought side by side against Megh-Takarr’s atrocities, whether they be sudden freezing temperatures, food deprivation, or monster attacks.

Maris silently shook his head. Internally, he implored Jildrin to keep her knowledge to herself, to not stand in their way. For a short while, they looked each other in the eyes. Desperately, Maris urged her to understand. Fluid of heightened emotion collected in the

corners of his eyes. If Jildrim betrayed their secret, Kesindra would lose all will to live; her remaining existence would be hell. An escape back into the imaginary fiction games was no longer open to her, but the door to irrevocable madness remained with her to the last like a faithful friend. *I couldn't bear it.*

"What did you find?" Maris asked, trying to sound as indifferent as possible. He had to ask if he wanted to avoid looking suspicious in front of the sensor probes.

Jildrim opened her lips and closed them again. Her eyes took on a sad expression. "Nothing important," she said. "I didn't mean to disturb you. See you later."

"Yes, later," said Maris, but he knew better. *Never again,* he thought. *But what difference does it make, Jildrim? You are one of the few who believe in escape, like Ketaran. You don't want to admit that we're lost. Arkon has forgotten us.*

Jildrim Hantar turned around and left them alone. Kesindra sank against him, drained. "I thought our secret was out," she whispered.

He stroked her back reassuringly. "Everything's all right." A simple sentence, and true. They had made their decision.

Together, they would die.

17.

In the Wise Ones' Stronghold

Unexpected Encounters

Eric Manoli, his two Topsidan companions, and Kikerren the flying lizard reached the platform directly by the cliff face without anyone bothering them. However, as soon as they turned toward the vines that hung from some unseen point high above, four Topsidans rushed over to them.

Before the students could say a word, Gihl-Khuan barked, "What do you want?"

One stepped forward, his arms raised as if to strike. "Only Trogh may set forth on the ascent to the Wise Ones' Throne."

"Look at me and repeat what you just said." Gihl-Khuan's voice quaked with suppressed rage.

"But—"

"Go away or I'll order you to leave the stronghold at once!"

The Topsidan seemed to shrink back. He clearly didn't know how to deal with this situation. Was Gihl-Khuan really a Trogh? Or was he just putting on airs?

Manoli was no better able to judge. What had happened to his companion? Where had the damage to his face come from? Had he done it to himself—or had he really attained insight, however that happened?

"You!" Gihl-Khuan said, pointing at one of the four-strong group of Topsidans who was standing apart from the others. At the same time, Kikerren fluttered by the unfortunate pupil and floated past his face, flapping her wings. "Go and get Thersa-Khrur and ask *her* if you should hinder our ascent!"

A bold move, Manoli thought, though he kept it to himself. If they weren't going to play their hand now, then when?

The pupil hesitated.

"Go, already!"

"We...may have made a mistake."

"Go!" Gihl-Khuan ordered. "I'm not interested in your apologies!"

The Topsidan who had spoken first lowered his head submissively. "We won't keep you any longer."

"A wise choice," Khatleen-Tarr stated strictly.

The four students withdrew. Kikerren flew over to Manoli, croaking with satisfaction, circled his head once, and then flew upwards, staying close to the wall. As she did, she turned her head to look down at the trio encouragingly.

Manoli gazed up. The stone wall seemed to tower upward endlessly. He'd already scaled a tiny portion of it on the spiral staircase. The vines were a different beast, however. They disappeared somewhere in the clouds hundreds of meters up, and even that might still be a long way from the actual peak.

In comparison, the climb to the stronghold was child's play. How were they going to manage it? Manoli thought of his recently damaged and bloody hands, and his limited strength reserves. He was at risk of collapsing when the air grew thinner or freezing when the temperature sank and the icy wind cut into him, when he was forced, perhaps, to clamber through fields of snow and ice.

But it *was* possible. The Trogh who had gone up there and come back were proof of that. Assuming they really existed, and the reports of their journeys, and of the ominous Wise Ones' Throne itself, were not mere rumor.

The thoughts weighed him down. Gihl-Khuan and Khateleen-Tarr could manage it, being young and strong Topsdians, but given

the 1.3 gravos that Manoli's body was not built for, the weaker human was bound to fail.

Gihl-Khuan was clearly untormented by such dark thoughts. He grabbed one of the vines. "Let's go!"

Manoli followed his lead, albeit without the same conviction. Immediately, he felt the warmth and soft pulsating of the strange plant.

And at once, he *understood*.

The maimed Trogh managed the path to the summit. With one arm, Thersa-Khrur had climbed hundreds of meters in an astonishingly effortless and nimble way. So it couldn't be this difficult—there had to be an easier way to get to the stronghold, and the peak. Since the vines were the only way, however, it had to depend on how you used them. They were more than simple ropes. They were *alive*. In the soil, it had seemed like they were literally moving away from him, as if the roots were trying to crawl back through the soil.

He shared his thoughts with the others. Gihl-Khuan, who had already climbed a few meters, stopped and actually slid down a little way. Kikerren fluttered excitedly.

"What did she say?" Manoli asked, taking it as a given that his companion really could understand the small creature.

Gihl-Khuan listened, craning his head back and turning the unburned half of his face toward the flying lizard. "That we should hurry. The Wise Ones' Throne awaits."

"But how, Kikerren?" Manoli called. "Tell us how we can make this ascent!"

Kikerren landed on one of the vines and clung to it with all her feet. Then she made a melodious sequence of croaking sounds.

"The same way the Trogh do," Gihl-Khuan translated.

Kikerren sank a tiny bit lower, then to the left—and then rapidly

fluttered straight upwards.

Was that supposed to mean something? Or had the whole motion been pure happenstance? No, that couldn't be the case, not when...

Manoli pulled himself out of his thoughts. An idea came to him. "I'm going to try something," he announced. Then he grabbed one of the vines and repeated what the flying lizard had done: he pulled downwards, then to the left in a quick motion.

The pulsating intensified. More than that—something moved inside the vine...or was it the plant itself moving? Manoli felt twitching in his hands again—and the very next moment, his feet were flying.

The vine was dragging him into the air. He hurried along the cliff face, moving much faster than he could have climbed.

Manoli didn't know how it had happened, but one thing was clear: there was far more *life* in the vines than it appeared at first glance. They reacted to particular stimulation, and executing that correctly would make them twitch in the right direction like a muscle.

Manoli had to keep repeating the motion. Soon he managed to find a steady rhythm that guaranteed him a quick ascent. That was how Thersa-Khrur had done it with one arm. How the Wise Ones reached the summit without dying of exhaustion.

Khatleen-Tarr and Gihl-Khuan followed in the same manner. Sometimes they came closer, sometimes they fell behind. Khatleen-Tarr overtook him on her vine, which stretched upward about two meters to the side. That didn't bother him; quite the opposite.

Kikerren cawed happily and ascended with them. Her wings fluttered in the wind.

Eventually, they entered the cloud layer. Now they were fighting through thick fog. Billions of tiny water droplets glimmered in the air, and the temperature sank rapidly. Layers of ice glistened on the rock face, while huge icicles hung from every overhang.

A few times, the path led them between meter-wide ice spikes. Passing these was gravely dangerous. However, the surfaces of the vines themselves never froze; they kept pulsating and exuding their pleasant warmth.

The cold hit Manoli hard. Even if he didn't have to climb under his own power, it was still a strain to bear his whole body weight the entire time, especially in the increased gravity. His body was rebelling. On top of that, the air was getting thinner and thinner; he inhaled deeply, hastily, and felt like was barely getting any oxygen at all. He was breathing his lungs full ever more quickly.

Being a doctor, he knew that he shouldn't exert himself too much in these conditions—but what other choice did he have? He had to keep making the vine pull him higher. He looked over at Khatleen-Tarr, who wore a tense facial expression, her snout pressed tight. She didn't say a word, and in fact gave no indication that she was even aware of his presence. He could understand that all too well. She didn't want to waste the tiniest bit of her strength.

Blackness crept in at the edge of his vision, and dark stars flashed before him in the white of the cloud fog. His head fell onto his chest and he looked downward. Gihl-Khuan was climbing about ten, twenty, maybe forty meters below; he couldn't tell.

Manoli doggedly stimulated the vine again and was pulled upward, little by little. Then, suddenly, he tipped forward and almost lost his grip in horror. Panicking, he clung on tight as icy cold surrounded his entire body. He was finally unable to breathe at all anymore.

Nothing worked anymore. Nothing.

His heart hammered. *Calm, Eric, calm... Don't waste too much oxygen...*

Only seconds later did he realize what had happened.

The rock face wasn't rising up vertically anymore. The mountain did keep going, but at an angle that allowed for climbing on foot. Manoli had tipped forward into a snowfield. That explained the icy

cold—and the feeling that he couldn't breathe, which was no mere feeling, but reality.

He rolled sideways and pushed himself up with both hands. His head came free. Hastily, he wiped the snow out of his face and drew breath.

He was trembling.

The vine ended, rooted there, where it disappeared into the deep, thick layer of snow. That these plants could have grown at all under such extreme conditions astonished him.

Kikerren landed on his back, cawing and pulling at him as if trying to personally pull him to his feet. Naturally, the creature lacked the strength for that. But Manoli dragged himself up. He had to, whether he liked it or not, if he wanted to survive.

Still, in this bitter cold and thin air, he would die miserably if he didn't find help.

The Wise Ones' Throne. Maybe there was technology there that allowed the Trogh to survive this inhospitable environment. But who could possibly live up here to welcome those seeking the peak?

He felt a touch and turned around. It was Khatleen-Tarr.

She brought her face close to his. "Keep going!" she breathed. She was right. They had to keep moving steadily—that would keep frozen death at bay.

What about Gihl-Khuan? Where was he? Kikerren flew back, down the cliff face, no doubt to her companion. All they could do was hope he caught up. Khatleen-Tarr and Manoli dragged themselves onward through the cold, gasping for breath.

All of a sudden, the fog lifted, the cloud sea around them clearing. Sunlight descended, not warm, but at least *less cold*. A bizarrely rugged, wonderfully imposing mountain landscape opened up before them.

The summit.

And Manoli could see the Wise Ones' Throne. There could be no doubt that the lofty form of rock was exactly that. It looked like an enormously oversized seat, behind which a column-like, interlocking rock formation towered.

A wonder of nature. That was the thought that ran through his mind. He looked back; Gihl-Khuan and Kikerren still hadn't come over the edge to the actual summit area. But rather than focusing on that, he looked at the gigantic stone throne again.

One piece of rock drew his attention more than any other. It formed the front right edge of the "seat," and someone was hunched on it. Manoli staggered closer alongside Khatleen-Tarr and couldn't believe his eyes. It was a Topsidan. He had his back turned to them. Straps ran over the back of his head.

When the two of them had almost reached the figure, the stranger suddenly turned around. The sight struck Manoli like a physical blow.

The Topsidan was old and wearing a breathing apparatus. But that wasn't all. A thoroughly anachronistic rubber band fixed a glowing red eyepatch to his head.

"Trker-Hon!" Manoli uttered, so mystified that his voice lost all strength. He stumbled, but Khatleen-Tarr was next to him, to keep him propped up. How had the Topsidan Wise One gotten here? He'd gone missing with Crest and Tatiana Michalovna! Was Manoli's mind playing tricks on him? Was he hallucinating because he was currently dying and his brain wanted to distract him from the grim reality? "What are you doing here?" he asked.

Trker-Hon stood up and came directly over to him and his companion. "Settling a debt," he intoned through the breathing apparatus. "You risked your life to save mine. Now I'm—"

The Wise One stopped mid-sentence as a flashing metallic shadow drew over the peak and descended, roaring.

Manoli lifted his head. *A dream. I must be dreaming.* But he wasn't.

The spacecraft, measuring at least thirty meters across, was now floating close above them. It cast a dark shadow over the throne, obscuring Manoli's vision so much that he couldn't make out a single detail.

"No!" cried Trker-Hon. "Come on, we have to—"

He didn't get any further before they all lost contact with the ground. An invisible tractor beam grabbed the Wise One, Eric Manoli, and Khatleen-Tarr and pulled them toward the ship with brutal force.

18.

Topsid, the Government District

Victory and Loss

Megh-Takarr left his bodyguards behind and entered the healing room, a space of uncommon splendor intended for high-ranking or very rich members of Topsid's government. Exquisite materials and timbers had been used, and these exuded a calming scent that promoted healing, helping the brain to reach the ideal wave pattern for recovery. The air humidity level was kept comfortably high for easier breathing.

Behind him, the door closed with a light click, shutting out the bustling unrest of the metropolis. Even the windows were darkened; they simulated dusky twilight. Megh-Takarr could make out nothing of Sendschai-Karth, not even the government towers' silhouettes.

He stepped over to the round nesting shell in which Trevin-Kohn lay. The patient's right leg was hanging in a cradle attached to a stick; it ended in a stump just below the hip. The former Tass-Dorr certainly wasn't going to run away from him. Several machines stood beside the bed that would take over his breathing and other organ functions in an emergency.

When Trevin-Kohn saw the despot, he practically fell apart. His amber-colored eyes held a brokenness that Megh-Takarr had sought in vain in those of the rebel Bismall-Kehn.

"Despot," Trevin-Kohn uttered. The fraud. "What an honor."

Megh-Takarr moved his tail aside and sat down in a guest chair next to him. "It is indeed. And my time is limited."

They looked at each other. For a moment, cold rage glimmered in the patient's eyes, then they held nothing but resignation. He gently lifted the stump in its frame, as if to show it to the despot accusingly.

“What do you want? Haven’t you done enough to me already?”

Megh-Takarr tilted his head in a gesture of disavowal and contempt. “Me?” he echoed innocently. “It was a traffic accident. These things do happen.”

The scent of illness and injury was joined by naked anger. “You’re mocking me.”

Megh-Takarr didn’t deny it. Naturally, he had arranged the glider crash that had cost Trevin-Kohn a leg and his pride. It was not worth wasting so much as a single word on. Since he had also arranged for the sickroom to be monitored, Megh-Takarr knew that they weren’t under sensor observation. He could speak freely, without even recording devices delivering evidence of his crime. “You know why it happened. It’s Karr-Tork.”

Trevin-Kohn fell silent. He was the loser. His dream of seizing the post of despot had gone up in smoke. His position on the council was vacant. By the time his rehabilitation period ended and he got used to his new artificial leg, a lot of water would have flowed through the sewers.

“Why did you come here?” asked Trevin-Kohn after a while. He looked calmer. Maybe he had received medication that helped him with that, or he possessed more greatness of character than Megh-Takarr had given him credit for.

“To assure myself that your foolish plans have been vanquished along with your leg. If you were strong, you might manage to return to your post in the long term, despite your newfound disability. I don’t want that. I don’t want a Tass-Dorr who bows to me in the council while planning my downfall behind my back. I could have killed you, Trevin-Kohn, but I chose this.”

That was a lie. If it had gone according to Megh-Takarr’s plans, the man would have burned to death in the glider, but he had been pulled out too quickly. This irritating outcome had meant Megh-Takarr could carve only half a notch in his beam, but never mind. Several things had gone awry lately, so he couldn’t be choosy. Better times would come—he already saw them on the horizon.

“See it as a second chance,” Megh-Takarr proposed. “You’ll stay away from government affairs permanently.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Well…” Megh-Takarr stood up, walked slowly and provocatively over to the window on his two legs, turning his back to Trevin-Kohn. “Then you choose death. But not for yourself.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a registered Far-Gerk. Your ward works in one of Topsid’s foremost research bases. She’s gifted, as one would expect when a man of your caliber takes her on as her mentor. What’s less common is that you actually seem to be attached to her in a manner that goes beyond the social convention.” He turned to face Trevin-Kohn. “Ahlin-Rekk is her name, if I’ve been informed correctly. Should you return to your foolish ideas, you’ll have the opportunity to take part in your ward’s burial ritual. Is that clear?”

Trevin-Kohn’s voice sounded suffocated. “You’re atrocious.”

“Not at all. Clearly, you stepped out of the shell with the wrong leg.” He hissed with amusement at his own joke. “Let’s just say, I do what must be done.” With one last look at his crippled enemy, he turned around and left the splendid room. The expression in the man’s eyes had been a balm for the soul. He was sure that Trevin-Kohn had learned his lesson.

Megh-Takarr carefully shut the door behind him. He felt tired and run-down. He had found this duty repugnant. True, he enjoyed the victory, but the walk into the hospital tower had cost him quite some effort. If he could have helped it, he’d gladly have stayed away from this haven of weaklings.

Accompanied by his bodyguards, he made his way back to the glider. As he walked, he checked the current situation in his collection. There had been an argument about food resources that exhilarated him. He loved it when his collectibles fought with each other. With 3D mode enabled, he watched as the light faded from the facility’s artificial ceiling, granting them the peace of night.

With curiosity, he looked for Arinar and Dehvon. He was puzzled to realize they weren't in Sector Blue. Clearly, they had tarried before the energy gates closed in Sector Orange. But why? To talk to number 41? They did that sometimes.

Darkness fell abruptly over the enclosure. Clearly, Arinar and Dehvon hadn't yet found a hammock in the trees, as was urgently needed. After all, in this section, the Derkalaks emerged from their holes in the ground at night, so it wasn't safe to sleep on the ground. His favorite inmates knew that and were, this very moment, climbing up a potential sleeping tree with a hammock. They'd sought out a particularly tall one, and Arinar almost slipped and fell twice while climbing before she reached a wide bough.

The despot watched with interest as the pair brought the hammock into a sitting position. They attached the ropes far too close together. "Stupid," he hissed. At the same moment, the thought came to him that perhaps they didn't mean to sleep at all, but rather to mate in the improvised bed up there among the branches.

Get closer, he thought impatiently, since the sensor probes were still some distance away, behind white-veined leaves. What was going on? Why didn't they fly closer to the couple? As usual, the flying optics approached from above. Squinting, Megh-Takarr recognized the problem. Subtle lines ran across the image. The probes had gotten caught in a finely woven net. But who had put it there?

What's going on? The despot stopped mid-stride and stared at the image. "Enlarge!" he cried in annoyance. He'd spoken far louder than necessary; the voice sensors reacted to the most minuscule volume.

Two nurses in pale green scale robes hurried past him with lowered snouts as the image grew to life size in the hospital tower hallway.

Megh-Takarr looked with widened eyes at the hammock that Arinar and Dehvon were setting up incorrectly on a thick bough. *That's too many ropes... Why?* It took valuable seconds before he

realized. Immediately, he contacted Nhag-Derekk, the zoo's overseer. "Light in Sector Orange! Raise the alarm!"

Bright lights flared to life. The hammock fell to the ground, smacking against the wet soil. Arinar and Dehvon looked at one another. Both were standing upright on the branch like acrobats. They had tied the excess ropes to the tree and were wrapping nooses around their necks, lit by spotlights.

Turmoil broke out in Sector Orange. People holding poles jumped out of their sleeping hammocks in the trees. Guard robots floated over and sprayed a sleeping gas. *It's too late!* Megh-Takarr realized. The machines wouldn't reach the lovers in time.

Arinar and Dehvon held hands.

"What are you doing?" number 41 shouted up at them, standing among other members of the collection. Finally, the guards got there too and pushed the assembled Arkonides onto the ground.

Arinar and Dehvon looked each other in the eyes and jumped. There was an ugly crunch as their necks broke. It was the sound of finality. They died on the spot. Though Dehvon's face remained expressionless, Arinar was smiling.

Megh-Takarr beat his tail against the ground, unable to control himself. The two Arkonides couldn't have survived a jump like that. In disbelief, he looked at the spinning lovers, who dangled from the branch next to one another. What had happened? Why had they done it? Had they gone insane?

"What do I have guards for if they can't protect my valuable collectibles?" This incident would make him a laughingstock in the uppermost circles. But the shame of that angered him less than what he'd just had to witness. He didn't understand it. What had gone wrong? Had the pair argued again, and ensnared themselves in their own inner battles? What could they possibly have been thinking?

He needed someone to explain this irrational behavior to him. With fitful movements, he established another link to the

collection's overseer. "Nhag-Derekk? I want to see number 41 in my living sphere. Now!"

The overseer confirmed the order. He looked crestfallen but didn't dare utter a single word about the incident without being asked. Clearly, he feared losing his post, and with good reason. What was the use of an overseer who had *this* happen on his watch? The two Arkonides must have set the ropes aside somehow. His guards weren't there only to prevent escapes. They should have stopped this too.

Megh-Takarr switched off and walked to the government glider. *Dead. They're dead. My best pieces.* It angered him immeasurably. The whole way to his living sphere, he didn't say a single word.

When he got there, he threw out the guards and waited for number 41. In the meantime, he stood still, staring down at Kerh-Onf from the surrounding balcony and trying to make sense of it. He didn't succeed in that endeavor.

At last, the familiar door hiss sounded. Two collection guards delivered number 41 to him. The prisoner was wearing the usual security measures. Thanks to the ring chains, he couldn't move, only speak.

The despot walked back and forth in front of him. Inner turmoil had seized him. "I demand an explanation! Why did they kill themselves?"

Number 41 looked at him through red eyes. The expression was fatally reminiscent of Bismall-Kehn's. "Do you really not know, most esteemed despot? Can you not think why?"

He spoke the words "most esteemed despot" in such a way that Megh-Takarr couldn't tell if the Arkonide meant it ironically or not. Was the worthless wretch mocking him? He felt helpless in a way that made him frantic. From the looks of things, he'd never find the key to grasping these creatures. "Would I have had you brought here if I knew, pale-skin?"

The collection piece fell silent. It was a heavy, all-encompassing

silence that hung like lead in the humid air.

“Talk! At once!” Megh-Takarr snapped at the white-haired man. “Why did they do it? Was it about their argument? Are Arkonides unable to cope with disagreements in their relationships? Was their hate for one another too great?”

The other man did not answer. The corners of his mouth twitched; his eyes gleamed wetly, the hate in them unconcealed. Megh-Takarr knew that this Arkonide would kill him if he had the chance. Usually, number 41 hid his rage proficiently, but at this moment, his bearing exuded one single wish: to destroy the despot.

“You *will* answer me,” said Megh-Takarr. Gradually, he was calming down. There could be another couple that would bear an Arkonide hatchling for him. Others somewhere in his collection would find their way to one another and be less complicated.

“And if I don’t? You can kill me, Despot. Go ahead. Do it.”

Megh-Takarr hesitated. He was impressed by the man’s proudly raised chin and the passion in his voice. The Arkonide had closed his fingers into fists and was meeting his gaze. Every centimeter of him was as unyielding and resolute as the ancients of this species had been. The despot could picture those like him conquering a system to bring it under the regent’s control.

“So, you don’t have anything to say to me? No explanation?”

“No.”

“I want to understand.”

The prisoner’s voice trembled. “Anyone who values freedom would understand it.”

“I’m not just anyone. I am Megh-Takarr!”

“Then I can’t help you.”

They stared at each other as if the first one to look away would die. It lasted until the prisoner lost the battle. Perhaps he did so on

purpose, having finally remembered who he was—or was it just that an Arkonide couldn't keep still for as long as a Topsidan? Megh-Takarr didn't know. It was all the same to him. The only thing that mattered was his victory.

Turning abruptly, he looked at the two guards who had brought the prisoner in. "Take him away, put him back. I want to be alone."

Not gracing number 41 with a single further look, he stepped over to the beam and stroked it with all six fingers, lost in thought. *There's only one answer. They must have gone insane. Clearly, Arkonides can't withstand captivity.*

The door closed with a light click. Calm returned. Megh-Takarr thought back on the beautiful and exciting moments he'd spent observing the pair.

When another hissing sounded, he reluctantly looked up. For an instant, he considered keeping the door closed and leaving the uninvited guest standing outside. Then he opened it after all. Before him stood Oric-Altan.

Megh-Takarr blocked the way into his living sphere. "Not now. I'm mourning."

"I know. But I've brought you something that might ease your pain." Oric-Altan stepped aside. The despot's gaze fell on three scruffy figures: two Topsidans and an Arkonide.

An elderly man. A glowing red patch covered one of his eyes. Megh-Takarr recognized him as a Wise One.

A young, attractive woman. Khatleen-Tarr. The deserter and whore who had thought she could defy his will.

And finally the Arkonide. He was small for his species, and his head hair was uncommonly dark. It was the Arkonide he had spent months searching for. The Arkonide who would ensure that his dominion never came to an end.

"Erikk-Mahnoli," said the despot Megh-Takarr with satisfaction. He grew warm, and could smell his own excitement and joy. "I

knew I'd be seeing you again."